Guitar MAGAZINE

AUGUST 2021
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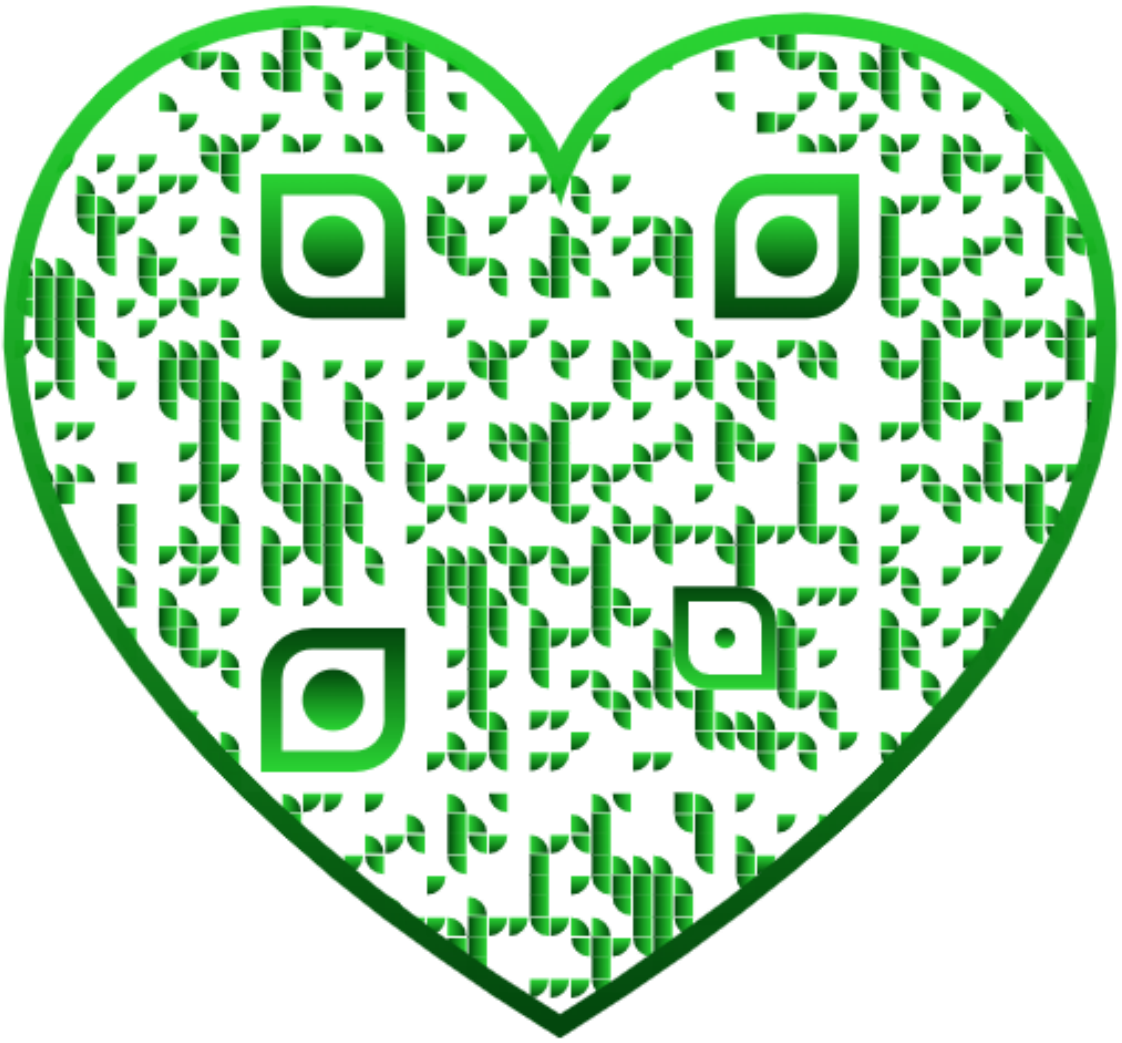

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EDITOR'S LETTER

BRAVE NEW WORLD

I recently played my first gig for many months and to say it felt great to be back onstage would be a planet-sized understatement. However, the enforced break from live performance did have a few interesting side effects. For one, some of my gear that hadn't seen much use since early 2020 had developed a few gremlins, and my guitars, amp and pedalboard all needed some love. And though I've probably played more guitar in the past 15 months than ever before, when was the last time I played standing up? Which strap do I even use? And how long do I like it set?

These issues successfully navigated, I began to think about how this period of inactivity has given those of us who play live an opportunity to rethink our stage rigs. Over the past few years, I've tried to pare everything down to the most minimal and compact setup that I can get away with: guitar, 1x12 combo, four or five stompboxes. Backbreaking load-ins are a thing of the past and it takes no more than a couple of minutes to get plugged in and ready for a line check.

But it could be simpler still, right? Spending a few months getting to grips with this issue's coverstar (and achieving really sensational results in the process, which you can read about from p72 onwards) has made me consider going 100 per cent digital at live shows. I'm not interested in lugging FRFR monitors around – the whole point of this new rig would be its easy portability and the fact that my 'amp' now fits inside the pocket of a gigbag – so I would only be using the Quad Cortex at venues and festivals that have good-quality onstage monitoring.

For someone who loves the interaction of electric guitars, hot glass bottles and volume as much as I do, it's going to require a leap of faith. I'll let you know how I get on but, in the meantime, please write in and tell us how your rig has evolved in recent months and, if you've returned to playing live already, how you got on after the extended break. As always, enjoy the rest of the mag and I'll see you next month.

Chris Vinnicombe
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Guitar CONTRIBUTORS

As we fix our sights on Neural DSP's space-age new amp and effects modeller, the Quad Cortex, we're compelled to ask: have our beloved valve amps finally had their day? Here, some of our writers tell us the last time they used one – and how loud they dared crank it

LEE CALVERT

BLUE COLLAR

When Lee first picked up the guitar, he wanted to play like Pete Townshend. After recalibrating his targets and tastes, these days he's settled for trying to play 30 per cent as well as Steve Cropper on his Baja Telecaster. He speaks to Jason Isbell about his own new Tele on p20. But when was the last time Lee cranked a valve amp? "My at-home amp is a Blues Junior," he says, "and it's played most days I'm there. But I've not had the master volume above about four for some time. Then again, rehearsal rooms are opening again soon…"

ROD FOGG

PLUGIN PROPONENT

London born and bred, Rod's first guitar was a 1950s archtop that never had a full set of strings. Today, he owns 30, including a '57 Gretsch Streamliner-6120 conversion, a home-built 1950s-style Tele with a body made from a 100-year-old kitchen counter and that archtop, now with six strings. See Rod's most recent chordal odyssey on p128. As for valve amps… "I use a valve amp at home but it's way too loud to crank, so I use pedals for overdrive and distortion," he says. "I use the AmpliTube plugin when recording at my place. It's great!"

DAVE HUNTER

WORD EATER

A former editor of this magazine, Dave once thought there was no way that modellers would ever replace valve amps. "But I'm ready to eat my words," he says. "Live, I still often prefer the traditional valve amp and pedals rig but I've recorded with almost nothing but modellers recently, including the Quad Cortex." For something decidedly more retro, flip to p108 and read Dave's profile of a maker with a "willingness to have fun with genres, rather than feeling he's too 'elite' to turn his hand to playful 60s-inspired catalogue-style guitars".

KELLY LAMANO

UNPLUGGED PERFORMER

Florida native Kelly counts an Epiphone PR-150 in Vintage Sunburst as her principal squeeze over her Fender Strat, which means that tube power is more or less off the menu. "No valve amps for me at the moment," she says. "I pick up my acoustic over anything else and record with a mic on my phone or computer. Simplicity is key." Kelly chatted to actor and musician Joshua Bassett for this issue's Talkbox feature. "He dove into the psychology and healing of songwriting and how it ties into breathing," she says. Head to p130 to hear his sage advice.

SAM ROBERTS

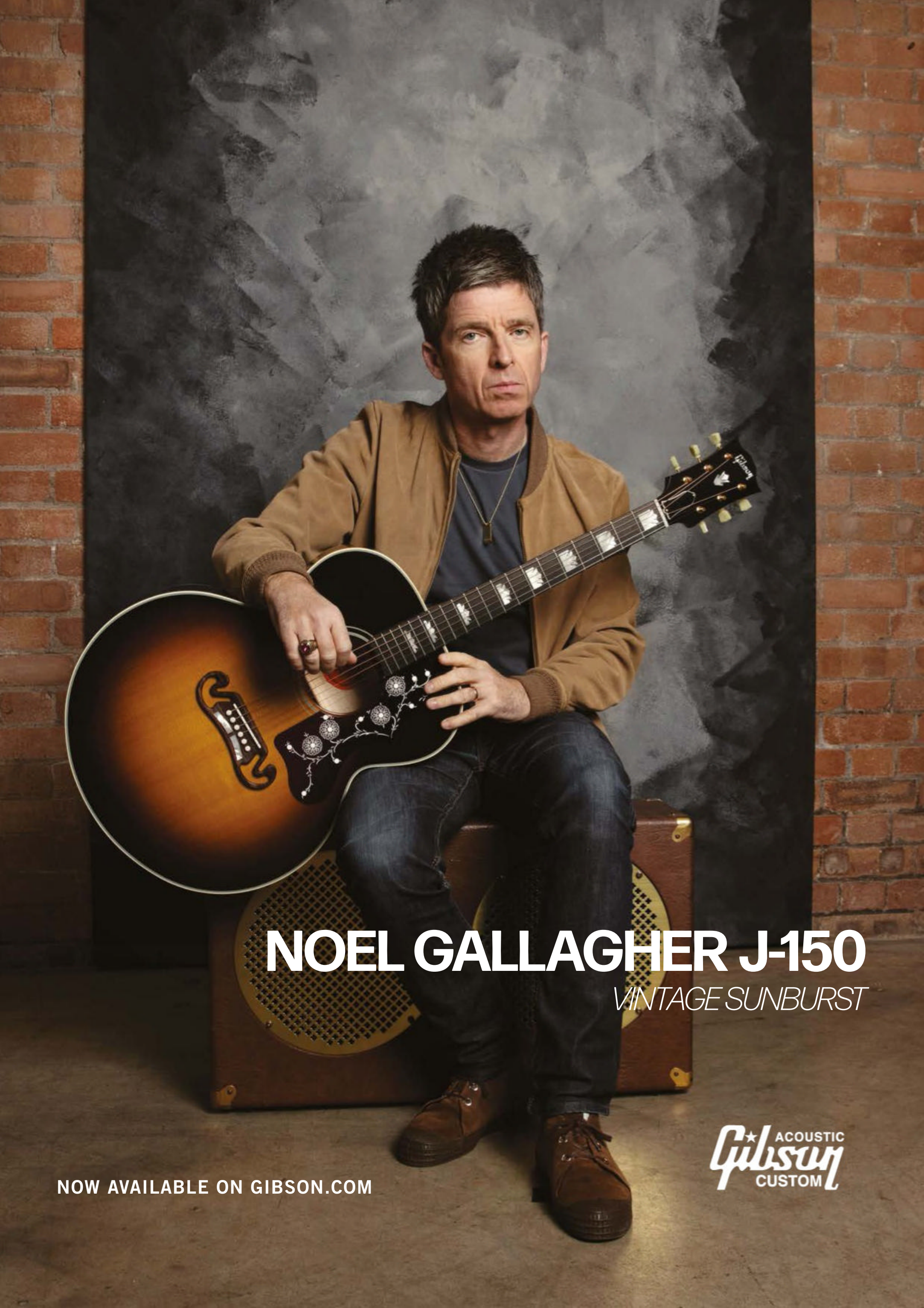
PUSHER MAN

Our Jaguar-toting associate editor Sam remains totally devoted to his 1968 Selmer Treble & Bass and has yet to find a modelling amp that's convinced him to part ways with it. "There's a sound in my head and the closest I've come to it is with that amp," he says. "I cranked it recently, live at the Louisiana in Bristol, and the reopening of rehearsal rooms means I can push those tubes to the limit once again." Flick to p106 for Sam's interview with the founder of NativeAudio, who's channelling his heritage into minimalist guitar pedals.

GARY WALKER

HOME BOY

Former editor of *Long Live Vinyl* magazine Gary uses his Fender '68 Custom Deluxe Reverb at least once a week. "Although it seldom makes it past three on the volume dial," he says, "even at gigs." In this issue, Gary chats to Lucy Dacus about her new album and her pool of influences. "We got into some deep nerding out about our ever-expanding pedalboards, and Slayer's *Reign In Blood*," says Gary. "*Home Video* is already looking like one of my albums of the year." Go to p34 to find out all about Dacus's "love/hate" relationship with guitar.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FRETBUZZ

Your letters and observations on the world of guitar

Join the conversation Email us at editors@guitar.com

The evolution of Fender's 1960s Deluxe amps makes for a "fascinating story"

PRODUCT PLACEMENT

Am I the only one who thinks the current marketing you see online from guitar brands is boring, predictable and lazy? Don't get me wrong, I'm jealous of every YouTuber, podcaster and influencer's success. I'd love to be treated like royalty by brands. But do we need another signature 'thing', from another boutique brand, for another online personality? It's such a common thing now but does it really make people want to buy that brand's products?

It's not just the smaller brands whose marketing of new products is uncreative and increasingly shallow either. Even the big blue-chip brands seem to think that all you need to do for a product launch is to send a bunch of guitars to every YouTuber, Instagram influencer and artist in their Rolodex. And while this no doubt has the desired effect of drawing attention to the product, I think ultimately it devalues them and turns them into a 'flavour of the month' type thing that's everywhere for a few days and then just as quickly disappears. Rather than creating an ongoing (and evolving) story around the product that drives interest through us seeing people making music and being inspired by it, it instead feels like a rather hollow attempt to extract cash from their audience.

I'm not saying that brands should stop working with influencers, because clearly they have audiences that these companies want to tap into. But can they try to be a little less cynical? Can it not be integrated with something wider and more sophisticated than giving someone a free product in exchange for a video or post?

Here's an idea for every brand: don't hire a 'face' to do your marketing just because of a subscriber count. Don't hire someone just to push your own brand agenda. Don't make your most valuable asset worthless by simply giving it away. Brands seem obsessed with telling their 'story' these days but it seems like they're all telling the same story, in the same way, over and over again. It's not exciting. It's not fun. Do better. Am I the only one who feels this way?

C LAYNE, VIA EMAIL

TILTING AT THE WINDMILLER

I really enjoyed your interview with my favourite guitarist Pete Townshend in the June issue. His influence on rock music has been huge – first Marshall stack, feedback, stage gymnastics, windmills, volume, etc. But one thing that is often overlooked is that I'm pretty sure he has more signature guitars than any other guitarist. Over the years, I've seen a PT Rickenbacker 360, at least two SGs (my bandmate Steve has a Polaris White one), two or three Les Paul Deluxes (the ones with the numbers on the body), various Schecter PT models, a signature Strat with the Fishman piezo and a Gibson SJ-200. I can't think of any other guitarist that gets close!

PATRICK KILGALLON, NEWCASTLE, UK

DELUXE EDITION

Dear *GM*, I just want to say how much I enjoyed Huw Price's article on the Fender 1960s Deluxe and Deluxe Reverb amplifiers. Fascinating story. I have a '63 reissue Fender Vibroverb that I bought in 1993. It is just a wonderful-sounding amp, 45 watts with reverb and tremolo built in.

It came with two 10-inch Oxford speakers, which I didn't particularly like, a bit sterile sounding, so replaced them with twin Jensen Vintage Alnico for a warmer sound. It has been super-reliable. I replaced all the valves about 10 years ago but other than that, it's original. I think it would be useful for a future follow-on article to cover the history of the Vibrolux and Vibroverb amps and how they fit into the overall sales strategy during the '60s – which amps sold well and which didn't and the reasons why. Many thanks for such informative articles.

BARRY STOCKTON, CHESHIRE, UK

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ONES TO WATCH

CARDINAL BLACK

WORDS RACHEL ROBERTS

Chris Buck, the award-winning guitarist of Welsh alt-rockers Cardinal Black, discusses the benefits of maturity, his new love for dynamics and rhythm, and why Duo-Sonics are for recovering boy racers

You've recently resurfaced after a decade away. Why?

"The timing just felt right. The first iteration of the band fell apart pretty quickly, which left a lot unresolved, not only personally but also in terms of the amount of material that was left unused. With the pandemic having upended everyone's schedules, it gave us time to not only revisit that old material but put pen to paper on new music, and I think we were all surprised at just how quickly we fell back into a groove; it did not feel like a fortnight had elapsed, let alone the better part of a decade."

Given what you achieved early in your career, does that influence how you position yourselves today?

"Looking back, the first time around was a classic case of too much too soon. Steve Winwood showing up at our first show and inviting us to his studio set the ball rolling almost overnight. It was all a hell of a lot of fun but, in retrospect, so much attention and success in a short space of time gave us a warped perception of the speed that this industry moves at, which can be glacial. Inevitably, when that rapid progression plateaued, we weren't equipped to deal with it and the wheels fell off. Ten years on, we're a little dryer behind the ears but still have that hunger and enthusiasm to get in a room and make music for the hell of it, albeit with 10 years' added experience."

The band has matured and you've become a respected player in your own right since then. How does that impact the dynamic and the way you compose music?

"I've always preferred to write as part of a band and it's no different with Cardinal Black – the process is infinitely more organic if you're bouncing ideas off other musicians whose opinions and instincts you know and trust. We're all on an equal footing when it comes to writing and although one person may bring in the genesis of an idea, pretty much every track we've written has taken shape through our combined input. Where songwriting's concerned, ego has to take a backseat to what best serves the music."

You've also rounded out as four-piece outfit. Does that offer you more scope as a band?

"Absolutely. Something we were guilty of in the past was feeling that, as a power trio, everything had to be flat out all the time. It worked for Cream at the Albert Hall but, if your starting point is 110 per cent,

Cardinal Black, left to right: Adam Roberts, drums; Tom Hollister, vocals; Chris Buck, guitar; Sam Williams, bass

it doesn't really leave you anywhere to go. Aside from all being a little older and wiser, bringing in Sam on bass has given us breathing room because Tom's not having to fight multiple fires with playing bass and singing. Space and dynamic range are qualities you develop a different appreciation of as you grow older, and I think it took that experience and frustration of everything being at 100mph to get us to this point. There's a reason bands invariably mellow as they get older."

Are you revisiting old material or is the new line-up a total reimagining of the music?
"A bit of both. There was so much material left over that, as much as the focus was on writing new songs, it'd have been folly not to revisit them and see what still sounded good 10 years later. Some old songs have been brought forward verbatim and some have had sections repurposed into newer songs. We're not precious about them. They're ours to play around with, for better or for worse."

You describe yourselves as alt-rock but *Tell Me How It Feels* has a soulful Warren Haynes-esque feel. Does that suggest what's to come next?
"To a certain extent. We chose *Tell Me How It Feels* as the first single because we felt that it was representative of the band as a whole but, at the same time, I'd hate to feel pigeonholed by one song. That said, we didn't quite foresee it going straight to No.1 in the rock charts, so it'll be interesting to see what people make of the next single, *Jump In*. Now there's a level of expectation. It's a different vibe but ultimately it's the same band."

You also use your Revstar in the music video. Is that your main guitar in this project?
"I've always been pretty pragmatic with guitars in the sense that I always gravitate towards the one that I think will suit the song best – they're tools at the end of the day. A lot of the newer material is very Revstar-centric but there are other songs that just sound best on the guitars they were written on. My Fender Duo-Sonic's been getting a bit of use recently as well. That's such a sleeper guitar! It's impossible not to have fun with it. It's like the guitar equivalent of a hot hatchback. You can't help but rag it around Aldi carpark, musically speaking."

Do you find yourself tailoring your guitar set-up for Cardinal Black or are you using the same rig as you would in Buck & Evans?
"Around the time we started working on new Cardinal Black material, I put together a new pedalboard, consciously choosing some pedals that I wouldn't ordinarily have used for a Buck & Evans gig, just to place myself somewhere different creatively. There are still my staples – Thorpy Gunshot, Analog Man KOT, Snouse BlackBox – but one pedal that gets a hell of a lot of use with Cardinal Black is the Line 6 HX Stomp XL. It's primarily covering some weirder reverbs, delays and modulation but there's also stuff like the Poly Sustain [Line 6's take on the EHX Freeze], which can be incredibly inspiring when writing. I've also found a new favourite fuzz in the Mythos Golden Fleece, which I used on the solo for *Tell Me How It Feels*. Purposely picking pedals that I wouldn't usually use seemed a little counter-intuitive at first but it's had a marked positive effect on my creativity."

You seem to be leaving more space for your chord work too. Was that a conscious choice?
"Definitely. It's a totally overlooked artform but some of my favourite guitar players are incredible rhythm players first and foremost: Keith Richards, Izzy Stradlin, Pete Townshend, Jimi Hendrix, Malcolm Young. I get as much of a kick out of writing an interesting rhythm part as I do a lead part or solo, especially since we made a conscious decision to limit the amount of rhythm parts that I put on the EP. It leaves space for the other instruments to breathe and makes you more considerate of where dynamic changes come from. It doesn't always have to be another guitar part or going to the ride cymbal. Gigs are kind of a different kettle of fish but, on record, you can definitely afford to paint with finer strokes and it's fun to experiment with that."

What can we expect from your forthcoming EP and what song stands out the most?
"Personally, *Warm Love*, which will be the third and final single from the EP, has always been a firm favourite. But I've no doubt that so much of that is down to the excitement of finally seeing it finished. I'm really proud of them all, especially as they're just a small taste of what's to come. We toyed with the idea of putting a full-length record out straight off the bat but things are so uncertain at the moment – and I've seen so many great records fly under the radar as a consequence. We wanted to make sure that we only show our full hand when the timing is right and things are back to some sense of normality."

Finally, can we expect to see you out on the road anytime soon?
"I really hope so! Under any normal circumstances, these first few tracks would have been accompanied by a UK tour at the very least but, for obvious reasons, we're having to hold our horses. The response has been incredible though, which coupled with the inevitable thirst for live music after such a long hiatus makes me really excited to finally get back in a van. If I'm starting to miss the 2am, stale service station sandwiches, it's probably a fair sign that I'm getting itchy to be back on the road!"

Cardinal Black's *Jump In* is out now

THE PLAYLIST

ALBUM SPOTLIGHT

YNGWIE MALMSTEEN
PARABELLUM

INTERVIEW SAM ROBERTS

The neoclassical virtuoso on why working alone and embracing spontaneity guided him towards his "joyous" new album

Now with 21 studio albums to his name, there's not much that Yngwie Malmsteen hasn't covered throughout his illustrious catalogue. With *Parabellum*, however, he was free from touring commitments that might impede on his studio plans, giving him unprecedented time to compose an album that simply made him happy. "I wanted this album to have a joyous, spontaneous atmosphere," he says.

Following the blues-inspired 2019 album *Blue Lightning*, Yngwie has returned classical music, paying homage to Paganini while also reminding listeners that even Bach, Mozart and their ilk were keen improvisers. Indeed, his love of improvisation saw him sidestep routine in favour of an album meant to feel unrehearsed. His ability to compose outside rigid song structures was aided by his use of Pro Tools. But he's quick to assure us that he still uses the software like a tape machine, despite throwing out his Studers. "I don't do any trickery," he says. "I don't even know how time-stretching works!" Here he details his five favourite tracks from the *Parabellum*.

WOLVES AT THE DOOR

"The first song has a couple of interesting parts. I wrote the vocal melody first. The arrangement around the song started taking shape but I needed some sort of a structure in the middle. I wrote some arpeggios and thought, 'Let's get that at the start of the song'. That's how I work: I have the structure and the melodies and change them around – it's the same for everything. I often say that improvisation is the genesis of composition. The classical greats, Bach, Vivaldi, Mozart, whatever, they were improvisers. The way I work, even though I'm heavily classically influenced – except that I love Marshalls; I have 62 – I don't really approach things differently. When it comes to composition, it starts as improvisation. Improvisation leads to a theme and I go, 'Wow, hit record!'"

PRESTO VIVACE IN C♯ MINOR

"I had a whole year to make a record. It was amazing. I took my time. Not so much with the takes – the takes themselves that you hear, the solos and stuff, they're the first take. I don't like to do it over and over and over. This track is in C♯ minor and it's just playing the scale but moving it up and down. It's a bit demanding. I wanted to do it because I thought it would be a cool thing to have, and I wanted to push the second song."

RELENTLESS FURY

"This is a rock song. Even though what you hear on this album and what I'm kind of well-known for is that neoclassical hard-rock type of thing – melodic, sometimes technical – the reason I do that is because that's what makes me happy. I can write you a country-and-western song right now if you want. I can write a reggae song, the blues is very near and dear to me as well. When I step into the more straight, laidback groovy rock, it doesn't feel different nor weird. It's just a little more rock 'n' roll, you know?"

(SI VIS PACEM) PARABELLUM

"The title track is a little bit of a standout because it's a very difficult thing to do. It's very Paganini but I do it in B minor. It's not easy to play. I deliberately made that one a bit challenging for myself. But that wasn't the title track when I did it, that was later on when the titles came in and we were assembling the record and sequencing it. It always happens as a process. I spent one year on it – and by that I mean one year uninterrupted, whereas before I might spend a year on the album but, in between, I might go on tour and play shows. What did change was the detailing of the arrangements and the detailing of the harmonies. I allowed the song to grow and change, kick things out and add things in and so on. I always do that but this time I had even more time to do it."

SEA OF TRANQUILITY

"On this one, I still feel very confident. I'm very comfortable with it – but that might change! I just felt that it was a good ending, you know. It's got a really long guitar solo and a fade out; it wouldn't make sense if you put it down the middle somewhere. I don't just put the good stuff first. I don't think like that. Some of the greatest albums I know, the last song is the best song. It needs to be a good flow of keys, tempos and moods."

Parabellum is out 23 July via Mascot Label Group

This month's essential tracks for guitar lovers

JOHN MAYER
Last Train Home

The guitar megastar returns with an 80s-infused bop from his forthcoming eighth studio album *Sob Rock*. The synths may take the lead but stick around for the typically sublime lead work.

WOLF ALICE
How Can I Make It OK? (Live)

Released as a single from their exemplary new LP *Blue Weekend*, this live version of the track elevates Joff Oddie's work, with simple but sizeable riffs working perfectly against Ellie Rowsell's beautiful vocals.

RATA NEGRA
Una Vida Vulgar

On their much-anticipated full-length debut, the Madrid punks mask their gloom with an über-cool workout that borrows from the Ronettes and the Stooges in equal measure.

LUCY DACUS
Brando

The second single from her new LP *Home Video*, Dacus's latest is a typically frank tale about a dramatic schoolfriend. Find out more about the singer-songwriter's evolution in our interview on p34.

MORBO
¿A Quién Le Echamos La Culpa?

One of the last remaining bands from the Rock Subterráneo movement in their native Peru, this song is full of grit and confidence, combining guitar work that resembles 60s garage rock with modern melodies.

JULIAN LAGE
Squint

On his first outing for Blue Note, jazz maestro Lage dazzles with his unrivalled dynamics and feel using his new signature Collings 420 JL. This looks set to cement him as a living jazz legend.

JOHNNY FLYNN
Ten Degrees Of Strange

Returning to music following his recent foray into Hollywood leading-man territory with *Stardust*, Flynn reminds us of his talents as a folk troubadour, equipped with his trusty National Duolian.

ORVILLE PECK
Born This Way (The Country Road Version)

One of six LGBTQIA+ artists tasked with reimagining tracks from Lady Gaga's 2011 album in celebration of its 10th anniversary, Peck's take on its title track is all pedal-steel swells and chiming country guitars.

THE COLD STARES
Heavy Shoes

The Indiana blues-rock duo made up of Chris Tapp and Brian Mullins reveal the title track from their fifth album proper. Expect fuzzed-up garage licks and a dark richness throughout.

JARED JAMES NICHOLS
Skin & Bone

Blues Power returns on JJN's rabble-rousing new single, plucked from his forthcoming *Shadow Dancer* EP. You'll hear a blistering solo peeled off Nichol's beloved Old Glory Les Paul at 2:10.

STEVEN WILSON
Personal Shopper (Biffy Clyro Remix)

With this heavy remix of Steven Wilson's single, Biffy Clyro move away from the electronic sound of the original with a brutal reworking complete with riffery that rivals early Biffy material.

BILLY STRINGS
Wargasm

Featuring rapper RMR, Strings' latest offering is an eerie bluegrass single with chorusing acoustic guitar accompanied by fiery banjo melodies and beautiful violin interludes.

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A) 1952
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JASON ISBELL

GET LOOSE

We catch up with Jason Isbell to talk Telecasters, how it feels to be gigging for the first time in more than a year, what it's like acting for Martin Scorsese, plus how his new Fender signature model held its own against a pair of five-figure vintage guitars

WORDS LEE CALVERT
PHOTOGRAPHY FENDER

It's a little scary but I think it's going alright," says Jason Isbell down the line from Oklahoma, where the guitarist is on the set of director Martin Scorsese's upcoming film adaptation, *Killers Of The Flower Moon*, about the birth of the FBI. It's not a bad gig for a novice making his first forays into the world of acting. But did Isbell not fancy a turn in something a little more low-profile before jumping head-first into a major motion picture helmed by the one of the most respected directors of his generation? "Yeah it's a pretty short resume, for sure," he admits. "But it seems like a pretty good one!"

As you would expect for a man in possession of a great many fine guitars, it's not long before our conversation turns to six-strings. But at the forefront of Isbell's mind today isn't one of his stable of vintage instruments but instead a brand-new one: the Fender Jason Isbell Telecaster. This isn't Isbell's first signature instrument – he has a signature Martin D-18 – but there's something about an artist being honoured with a signature Fender guitar that always feels special. Given that, we wonder where this ranks in a career littered with so many singular moments over the past decade.

The Jason Isbell Telecaster sports a double-bound Chocolate Sunburst body with a light factory relic treatment, a pair of custom-designed pickups and a neckplate sporting a recreation of one of Isbell's tattoos

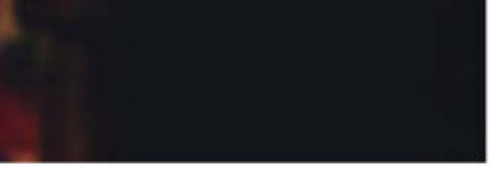
"I try not spend too much time dwelling on those things but it is a big deal when something like that happens," says Isbell. "The thing about getting my own signature Tele is that it speaks to the part of me that is most involved and interested in music, the real nerd part of me that likes guitars and the way they're designed and put together. More importantly, it gives me the chance to talk about guitars, because most of the time most people really don't want to hear about that stuff! People don't really want to see behind the curtain but I actually like to geek out about what makes guitars great and how they're used to make great music."

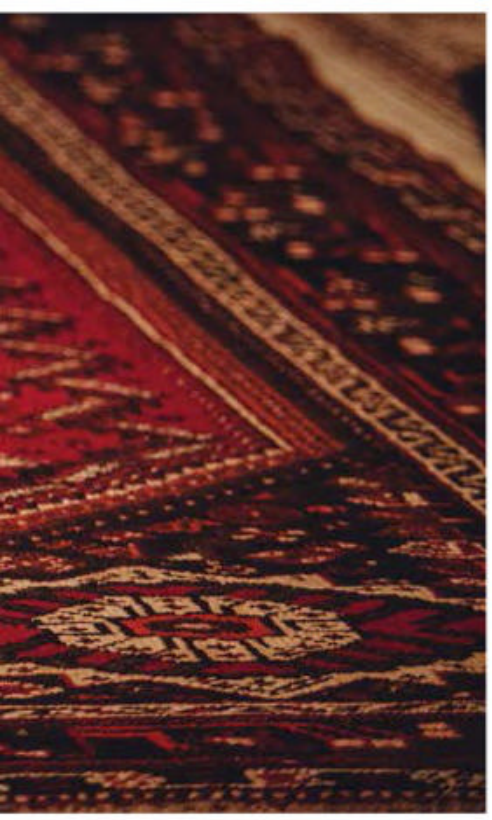
TELE-BRATION

That nerd part of Isbell has spent the best part of the past two years enthusing about the jewel in his vintage collection, the 1959 Les Paul known affectionately as Red Eye. But in recent months, he has often been seen on Instagram cradling a 1960 Strat that features heavily on the likes of *Overseas* and *Only Children* from his latest album *Reunions*. With that in mind, was the Alabama-born guitarist not tempted to put his name on a Stratocaster rather than a Tele?

"You know, a Strat was the first guitar I had as a teenager and, if you'd asked me at that time what signature I wanted, it would've been a Strat," he explains. "But I hadn't played out live at that point. I still love Strats but the Tele took the top spot for me after I had to go out and tour, play a whole bunch of shows and discover just how durable it is. What really got me was when I was playing Willie Nelson's Fourth Of July Picnic in Austin and, right before the show, my pedalboard died and so I had to play a set with no tuner. I had a Custom Shop Tele – one of the ones we based this signature model on – and I didn't have to tune it. It stayed pretty much in tune for the whole show – and this was in the day in the Fourth of July Texas heat!"

Unusually for a signature model, the Isbell signature Tele isn't modelled on any single guitar but is instead a combination of various aspects of a variety of instruments that he owns, all assembled together in a way that the guitarist feels works best for him. Through this considered grab-bag approach, Isbell feels that he can avoid the trap of signature guitars that are so perfectly calibrated for their artist that they don't work for the consumers who might like to buy them.





"I WAS HOPING A LOT OF PEOPLE WOULD BE INTERESTED IN THIS GUITAR WHO DON'T KNOW ANYTHING ABOUT MY MUSIC"

"I like all different kinds of guitars and I like to appreciate the differences," he observes. "But If I made a signature series guitar for people who were just like me, then we wouldn't sell a whole lot of them. I don't have to tune my guitars on stage now and I change guitars all the time, and I think it would be selfish to design a guitar with only me in mind. I couldn't think of a better goal to shoot for than a guitar that was versatile enough for somebody to take it out and make it their only guitar. I honestly think I could do a whole tour with this guitar and nobody would be disappointed with how it sounded."

Isbell goes on to detail a recent show in Florida, during which he played his signature Tele between two $50,000 vintage six-strings. "And it held up!" He says of the Telecaster. "The guitar being more affordable was deliberate and is the thing I'm most proud of – there aren't a lot of guitars in its price range that would do that."

CHARACTER BUILDING

Like many seasoned guitarists, Isbell is a great believer in utilising the full range of switches and controls on his guitars in order to get the most out of them. His signature model is no exception.

"This is not a guitar where you just plug it in and turn everything up to 10 and it sounds right in every position," he notes. "You have to actually use the controls and that was intentional. The bridge pickup is hot and very bright and resembles the one in my 1965 Candy Apple Tele, which is what Tim Shaw at Fender based the pickup design on. And it's supposed to be that way because you have a tone knob and you should have more treble on the bridge pickup of a Telecaster than you need. If you can't get a painful sound out of a Telecaster, it's not a good Telecaster! And you can and should always take treble off."

Something Isbell loves about 1960s Teles is the microphonic nature to their pickups, which he says adds dimensions to their tone and give them their sweet vintage sound. "I wanted that to happen with the signature, as I wanted it to sound like an old guitar," he adds. "To do that, it needs to be a little bit hotter. And I don't mean pickups wound more times. I mean you need to be able to make it feed back. It needs to sound hard to control, that's the thing."

Isbell's signature Telecaster isn't modelled on any specific instrument, but instead pulls together things he likes about various Teles in his collection

The neck pickup in the signature model is based on the Twisted Tele unit found in Jason's Custom Shop Tele. He returned to his '65 model when it came to signature guitar's neck, and getting the shape and feel just right was something that required a little finessing – but not too much.

"The first neck they sent me, the finish and frets weren't exactly right," says Isbell. "They sent another revision and nailed it. So it didn't take a whole lot to get right. Plus, I know I could go on forever with that and reach the point of diminishing returns so I didn't want to drive everybody crazy!"

STICKING YOUR NECK OUT

Many a guitarist has spent a long hour obsessing about guitar neck shapes, especially when it comes to guitars made in the 50s and 60s. But for Isbell, the shape wasn't nearly as important as the feel.

"I'm more interested in the finish of the neck than the profile," he affirms, "and being a guy who plays so many different guitars, I'm not married to one profile or size. That being said, I did once own a '54 Tele where the neck was uncomfortably big. But other than that, I'm pretty good with most necks. But I need the finish to be right – more that the finish has been played off than sanded off, if you know what I mean?"

It's hard to talk about playing wear without bringing up the thorny issue of relic'ing. Like Fender's Brad Paisley signature models, Isbell's Tele has been given some artificial ageing in Fender's Ensenda factory – and is likely to prove polarising.

"Oh yeah, that's like talking about sports or politics," Isbell exclaims. "People get crazy about it! But I just don't think a pristine new guitar looks as cool. Plus, when I was a kid, I got a new Strat and it scared the hell out of me. Playing the guitar was just terrifying because I didn't want to get a scratch on it. Every time I got a little scratch it broke my heart so I figured why not put a few scratches on it before you even ship it out, so people don't have to worry so much about it? Also, Teles are not fragile like Gibsons with their headstock angle, for example, and roughing a Tele up before you send it out is a testament to the type of guitar you're playing, because it is for work and you just shouldn't be too precious about a Telecaster."

The word "signature" has been used a lot throughout our conversation. But another notable fact about Isbell's Tele is that his name and signature are nowhere to be seen on the guitar. Instead, his trademark bird-and-anchor tattoo is stamped on the neckplate. Is he uncomfortable about the notion of quite literally having a guitar with his name on it?

"It wouldn't make me feel uncomfortable. I just didn't think it was necessary," he says. "The people who buy it because it's my signature guitar are going to know it's mine anyway and I was hoping a lot of people would be interested in this guitar who don't know anything about my music or might not even like my music. I don't want this to be a guitar for collectors. I want it to be for players, and not having my signature on it adds more to that: I want to make a guitar for guitar players, not just Jason Isbell fans."

BACK IN THE SADDLE

Follow Isbell on Instagram and you'll notice that, when he's not spending time with his wife Amanda Shires and daughter Mercy, he mainly spends it playing guitar. But practise isn't the same as the real thing. Gigs are gearing up again in the US and, with the announcement that his hometown festival Shoalsfest will return this year, Isbell and his band The 400 Unit have some ring-rust to work through.

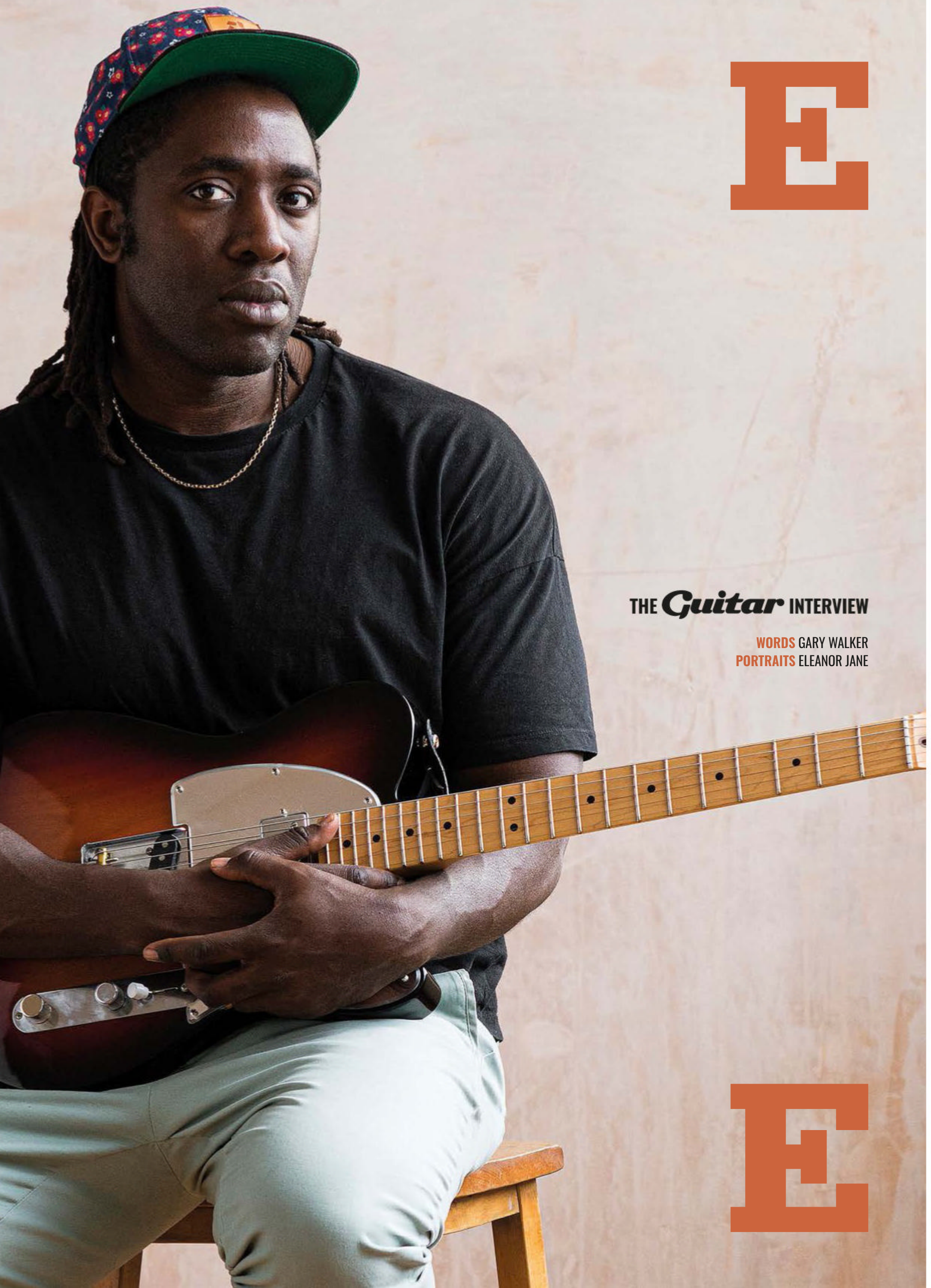
"We were loose the other night," reflects Isbell. "We'll probably be loose for a while. But we needed that show as a band. The guys in the band are so good that we can sound slick even if we're not quite there. My bass player [Jimbo Hart] came up and apologised after the show saying, 'Man, I hit so many clams!' And I heard them but I didn't care because he was in the moment, he cared about the song and was happy to be there and not just going through the motions."

"I've never disliked a concert because the band sounded rusty," concludes Isbell. "The only reason I've not enjoyed a show is when they didn't seem like they cared to be there. I don't think that's going to be a problem for us when we get to playing again"

Find out more about the Fender Jason Isbell Telecaster at fender.com

KELE OKEREKE

As the frontman of Bloc Party, Kele Okereke became an indie-rock icon with a Telecaster in his hands. But it wasn't until he became a solo artist that he truly moved beyond being "just the rhythm guitarist" and was able to lose himself in looping



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THE *Guitar* INTERVIEW

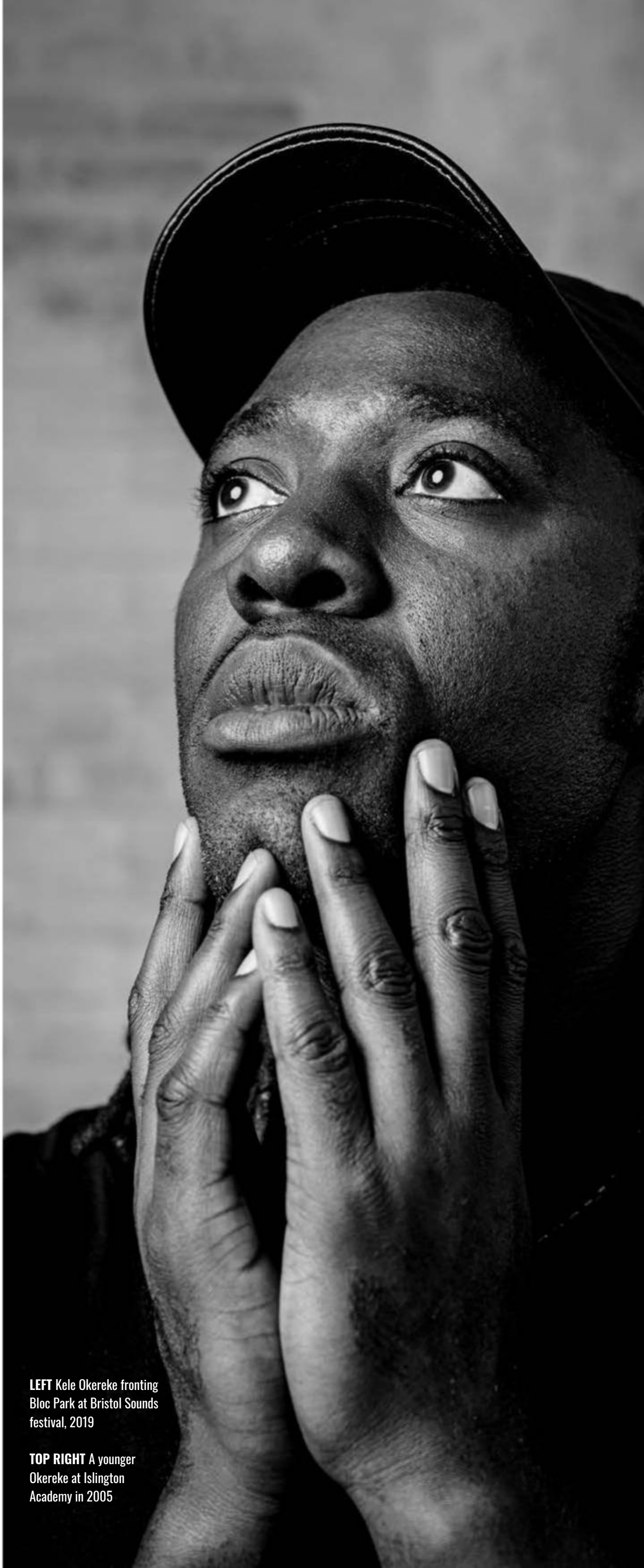
WORDS GARY WALKER
PORTRAITS ELEANOR JANE

E

Back in January 2020, Kele Okereke had big plans. Bloc Party were about to go into the studio to record their sixth album and he was due to start work on his second musical. When those ambitions were grounded by the pandemic, the 39-year-old Londoner all of sudden found himself a locked-down stay-at-home father to two children, with little time for music. Yet two things were about to happen that would reignite Okereke's passion for the electric guitar: he began embarking on midnight walks alone around the deserted streets of the capital, and his guitar tech built him a new two-amp recording setup that helped him unlock the creative potential of looping.

Before long, Okereke was deploying the new rig and his ever-present Telecasters on Instagram, entertaining the Zoom-quiz-fatigued masses by performing solo takes on Bloc Party songs and covers. He was also returning from those moonlit excursions with a brain fizzing with ideas. After 20 years as the rhythm man, overshadowed by Bloc Party's more flamboyant sonic architect Russell Lissack, and with a solo career that's frequently sidelined his primary instrument, it was time to step into the spotlight. *The Waves Pt. 1*, a meditative collection fashioned from cycling loops and interweaving arpeggios, is Kele Okereke's first true guitar album.

"It was only once I started to make solo records that I started to think seriously about my guitar playing and me as a musical entity, not just the rhythm guitarist in Bloc Party," says Okereke. "And it's only on *The Waves* that I've embraced the art of playing guitar. Although there are two guitarists in Bloc Party, Russell did a lot of the most dramatic, exciting moments – and he's a phenomenal guitar player."



LEFT Kele Okereke fronting Bloc Park at Bristol Sounds festival, 2019

TOP RIGHT A younger Okereke at Islington Academy in 2005

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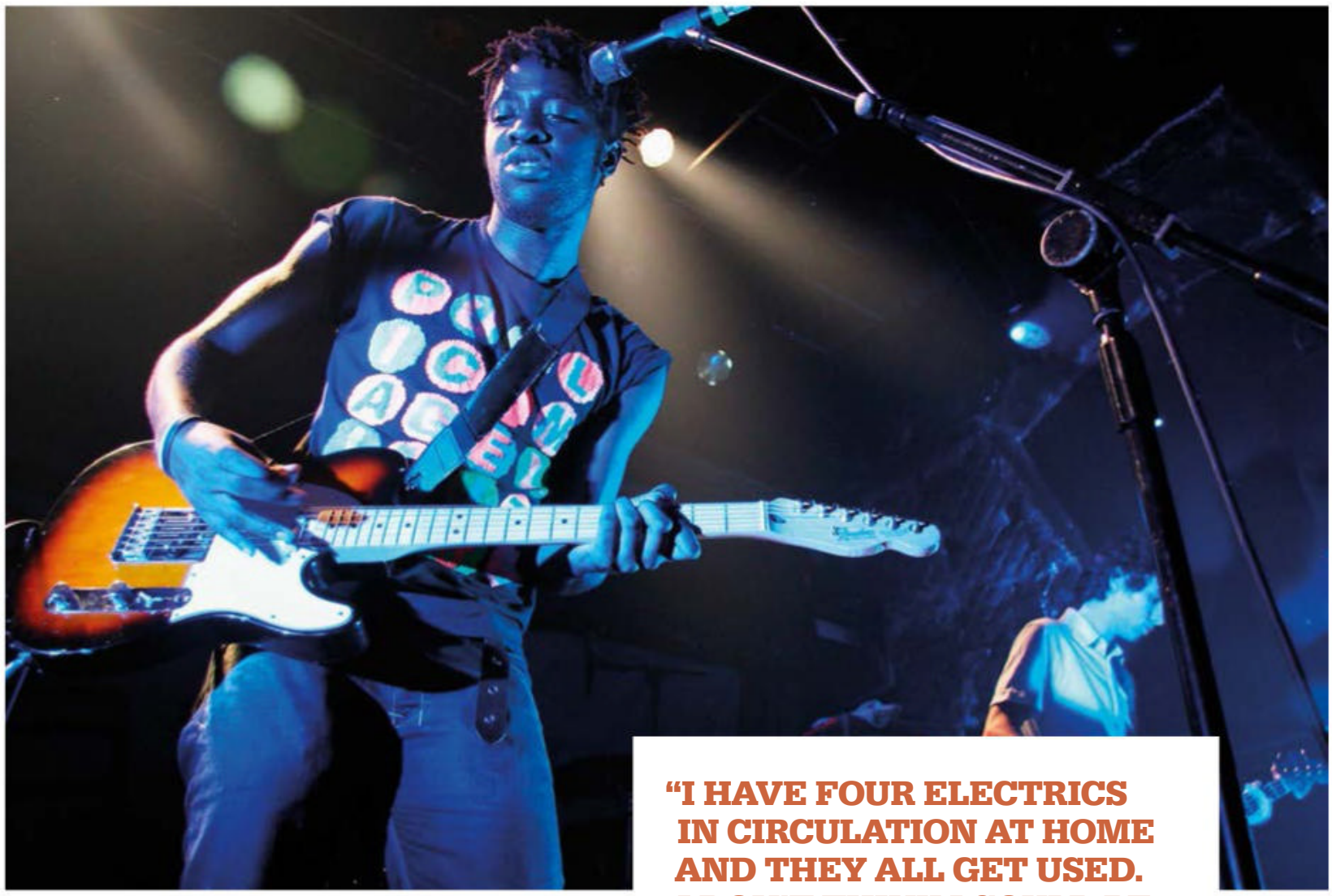

"I HAVE FOUR ELECTRICS IN CIRCULATION AT HOME AND THEY ALL GET USED. I DON'T THINK I COULD BE ONE OF THOSE GUITARISTS WHO KEEPS GUITARS AS ORNAMENTAL THINGS"

TOOLS FOR THE JOB

Okereke first picked up a guitar at 13, sneaking into his sister's bedroom to learn chords on her Spanish-style acoustic. Growing up with parents who were "not very musical", he was drawn as a teenager to British indie heavyweights Graham Coxon, Bernard Butler and Jonny Greenwood, alongside US alt-rock innovators such as Thurston Moore and Stephen Malkmus. Using the guitar primarily as a songwriting tool, he met the perfect foil in Lissack while he was studying for his A-Levels. They formed Bloc Party at Reading Festival in 1999.

"It was super-interesting when I started playing guitar with Russell," recalls Okereke, fondly, "because he was the opposite of me. He had this awesome party trick at school, you could name any song and he'd play the riff. He had a Boss DD-3 delay and we bonded over our love of pedals and soundscapes they could make. We had an interest in the sonic capabilities of the guitar and the guitarists we liked were more sonically adventurous. Mogwai's *Young Team* was a significant record for us both, and also going out to clubs, listening to rave music. We realised there was more the guitar could do than strumming chords. We wanted to make our own noise."

Bloc Party's early singles introduced a wiry, adrenal post-punk sound, with frenetic, skittish riffing and an intelligent use of delay tempos and live looping. Lissack's pedalboard quickly grew to enormous proportions as their 2005 debut *Silent Alarm* landed at No.3 in the UK chart, selling a million copies. Within four years, the band had three Top 10 albums.

"We just assumed that was what everyone went through," he admits. "We realise now, we were very lucky to be plucked out of obscurity and have an international audience care about us. That isn't what all bands starting out go through."

OFF THE WALL

Avowedly not a gearhead, Okereke has stuck largely to Telecasters since then, using whatever was in the studio on Bloc Party's albums. His writing instrument remains a 2002 Mexico-made Thinline example that was his first "proper" guitar purchase.

"I have four electrics in circulation at home and they all get used," he says. "I pride myself on using them to create different sounds. I don't think I could be one of those guitarists who has them as ornamental things. What's the point of putting a guitar on the wall and not playing it?"

After the band entered a hiatus following 2008's third album *Intimacy*, Lissack joined Ash's touring line-up, while Okereke released *The Boxer*, the first of five solo albums to date.

"I'd stopped pushing myself as a guitar player because I knew Russell was there," he acknowledges. "I remember reading Justine Frischmann saying she felt there wasn't any room for her to play in Suede because Bernard Butler was such a presence, and I definitely feel something similar. On those early Bloc Party records, I was so blown away by what Russell was doing that I never really pushed myself. Only on this record do I feel like, 'This is what you can do as a guitarist'."

Seeking new sonic pastures, *The Boxer* and 2014's *Trick* saw Okereke furthering his interest in electronic music. *Fatherland*, exploring his experiences as a new parent and gay man in a societally fracturing 2017-era Britain, was a folky delight informed by Elliott Smith and Joni Mitchell, while making *2042* two years ago proved to be "rewarding but traumatic",

Okereke's humbucker-equipped sunburst 2002 Telecaster was the chief guitar used throughout *The Waves*

as he examined his fears and anxieties about Brexit and institutional racism. He was also due to begin work on a second musical with the Lyric Theatre after the success of *Leave To Remain*. Amid the determined diversity of his solo catalogue, a common theme has often been the absence of electric guitars.

"With a lot of my solo records, I was adamant that I didn't want to use guitar, because in Bloc Party that's my go-to instrument and, I felt that if was going to try something different, I should put myself in an uncomfortable position. I learnt how to play the piano and so many different things so I wouldn't have to rely on the guitar. It's only on *The Waves* that it's front and centre."

MAKING WAVES

Up in the makeshift music room at the top of his house, Okereke worked quickly, deciding *The Waves*, a solo album in the purest sense, would be crafted almost entirely from guitar loops and vocals. The whole experience proved soothing for the anxiety he'd been feeling as the disturbing swirl of bad news gathered momentum daily.

"I'm so thankful that before lockdown, I'd been talking to my guitar tech Rich about having a setup at home where I could split the signal from my pedalboard to two amps and have them play against each other," Kele recalls. "I'd never done something which is just guitar, so why not take it to its logical extreme, take everything off and have it just be guitar tones and textures? It all had to be performed as it was written – I didn't want lots of overdubs to take up space. In taking the drums off, taking away that insistent locked-in rhythm, you're able to let rhythms cross and bubble over each other, creating a sense of movement. I was obsessed with this idea of connoting rhythm without using percussive instruments."

While Okereke is guarded about the details of his setup, the main guitar on *The Waves* is a another 2002 Mexican Tele, this time a humbucker-equipped sunburst model, with occasional appearances from his Thinline and a Gretsch Electromatic G5422T, but it was the tones of the Tele's humbucker that really captivated him. "Having the humbucker bridges the deep warmth and bright angularness of a Tele," he says. "It's nice to have that range of extremes."

Further tonal possibilities were offered by the presence of both a Vox AC30 and a Fender Blues Deluxe, with the pedals scattered around the floor of his home studio including a Line 6 DL4, Boss RV-5 Digital Reverb, TR-2 Tremolo, RC-20XL Loop Station and Turbo Distortion, plus an Electro-Harmonix POG, Synth9 and a pair of Big Muffs.

"For the majority of the looping, I rely on the DL4, which are hard to get now, but luckily we have a bunch in storage," Kele says. "I like them because they're quite responsive and easy to use. I don't use any kind of click or clock, which is challenging but exciting. That's been a new way of playing for me."

“WHY NOT TAKE IT TO ITS LOGICAL EXTREME AND HAVE IT JUST BE GUITAR TONES AND TEXTURES?”

“IF I’M HONEST, *SILENT ALARM* IS NOT MY FAVOURITE BLOC PARTY RECORD. BUT I UNDERSTAND THAT FOR A LOT OF PEOPLE IT MEANS SOMETHING”

From the luxuriant open chords and orbital scalic patterns of opener *Message From The Spirit World*, *The Waves* is a blissfully immersive experience. On *They Didn't See It Coming*, chattering palm-muted rhythms and hypnotic interlocking fretboard phrases provide the foundation as Okereke ventures out into the night, meeting only a pair of foxes "holding court". *Dungeness* introduces shimmering pitch-shifted lead lines and, on reflective single *Nineveh*, icy riffs dance around sonorous piano chords. The crystalline looped arpeggios and coruscating highlights on instrumental *The Heart Of The Wave* are the most beatific of all, while a cover of Bronski Beat's *Smalltown Boy* sounds as if it belongs to Okereke, his mournful falsetto complemented by the Tele's glacial chime.

In fact, much of *The Waves* is characterised by unadulterated clean tones, with distortion, drums and bass conspicuous by their absence. It leaves Okereke's playing nakedly exposed, a brave move for a guitarist accustomed to a supporting role.

"A guitarist I came back to a lot was David Pajo from Slint," says Okereke. "I was listening a lot to his solo stuff and there's a record called *Live From A Shark Cage* that I've kept on coming back to – minimal instrumental guitar work. The guitar I like tends to be bright clean tones and the guitarists I like play with that clarity. Robert Fripp, Isaac Brock from Modest Mouse – his playing has a tenderness and violence that's inspiring – and Vini Reilly from the Durutti Column."

ON THE BLOC

As our phone conversation winds its way through an unseasonably chilly spring afternoon, Okereke is a thoughtful and engaging subject. He's eagerly anticipating the rescheduled Bloc Party album sessions, from late May until mid-July. The new album will be the band's first since 2016's *Hymns* and they return to the studio enlivened by the *Silent Alarm* shows they played in 2018 and 2019. A decade-and-a-half since the release of their debut, Okereke struggles to articulate what it means to him.

"When we had to relearn it, it was fun because it took me back to the start, when we were writing these songs in practice rooms," he explains. "It was a nice trip down memory lane. I don't know what I feel about it is the honest answer. It's a record I'm proud of but, listening to it now, I just hear the things we didn't do right – it's the same with every record I've made. If I'm honest, it's not my favourite Bloc Party record. But I understand that for a lot of people it means something."

While Okereke is excited to see the energy sparked by revisiting *Silent Alarm* feed into the band's sixth album, we wonder whether there will be room on it for his newfound interest in cycling guitar loops?

"The loop-based playing on *The Waves* is out of necessity because I didn't have other musicians to play with," he says. "In Bloc Party, I don't think it would feel the same if everything is cycling. There's a beauty in that kind of frenetic energy that I don't think this sort of playing lends itself to. Before the first lockdown, all this music was written and it was its own thing that was a crystallisation of where we were as a band. We'd just done a year of performing our first album, that experience lit a fire in all of us, and that was clear in the music we were making. I don't know that I want us to make a whole new record because I feel like where we were at was a really good place. But let's see what the energy is like when we're all in the room."

Beyond Bloc Party's next chapter, Okereke is already formulating plans for another solo album. What's certain is that it will be another guitar-centric record, as he continues to embrace the art of playing the instrument he picked up in his sister's bedroom all those years ago – and take it to new and interesting places.

"I realised as I was finishing writing *The Waves Pt 1* that there's a whole other world to explore and I guess that's the perspective for the follow-up. If this record is about calming me down and gently taking people somewhere else, part two is going to be the opposite: waking people up. Still just guitar loops and voice but there's a whole other, more synthetic, more industrial place to go to that I'm kind of obsessed with. How do I use this setup to make music to wake people up, dance and move?" G

***The Waves Pt 1* is out now on KOLA**

Home Comforts

WORDS GARY WALKER PORTRAITS EBRU YILDIZ

Lucy Dacus has made albums for her friends and family. She's made records for her fans. But her latest is an album made squarely for her. As a result, *Home Video* is an eclectic, ambitious album that smashes down walls between genres, as well as preconceptions of who she was as an artist, whether it's channelling Slayer or making music she could dance to. We chat to the 26-year-old Virginian to find out about her love-hate relationship with guitar and why you shouldn't worry about impressing your own instruments

"Genres are boring," says Lucy Dacus, reflecting on the unconstrained creative spirit that informs her third and most tonally eclectic album to date, *Home Video*. "This time around, I was like, 'You know what, let's have the best sound for what needs to be done'. It's more complete, it's not trying to fit within any genre."

By way of example, Dacus has been talking us through the session in which she encouraged her band to "internalise the idea of Slayer and then just play" on a song about summer bible school. *VBS* is an otherwise gently reflective acoustic tale in which a "preacher in a T-shirt" teaches a young Dacus how to "build a fire and spread the word". But the air of bucolic innocence is punctured by 10 seconds of blisteringly distorted powerchord ferocity.

© Jason Kempin / Getty Images

Inside Nashville's Trace Horse Studio, where Dacus's 2018 album *Historian* was also recorded, Dacus and long-time guitar sidekick Jacob Blizard cranked every drive pedal they had to hand – among them a KTR Klon, a Walrus Iron Horse, an Electronic Audio Experiments Longsword and an EarthQuaker Devices Spires – in an attempt to summon what she remembers, laughing, as "the stupidest, loudest thing we can think of all at once". The Slayer tribute nearly went further too, with an original artefact from the thrash legends' seminal 1986 album *Reign In Blood* finding its way into Shawn Everett's mix, only to be removed at the last minute.

"He had the original stems from *Angel Of Death* and he'd put the cymbal from the actual song into the mix," says Dacus. "It was like, 'Dang, that's so cool… but it doesn't sound right,' so we cut it. It should be documented that he went there though. He gets extra points for that."

Dacus' Fender American Professional Telecaster Deluxe was her go-to for much of her work on *Home Video*

VIDEO GAMES

Moments of such contrast are plentiful across *Home Video*, recorded by Dacus, Oberlin Conservatory of Music graduate Blizard, drummer Jake Finch and producer Collin Pastore in August of 2019. The album is also the most personal that Dacus has written, a series of fiercely honest short autobiographical films that capture the old flames, broken promises and faltering friendships of her formative years in Richmond, Virginia.

On the song *Partner In Crime*, her unexpectedly Auto-Tuned vocal is anchored by an almost hip-hop beat as Dacus plunges fearlessly into memories of a toxic relationship, intoning gravely "my heart's on my sleeve, it's embarrassing, the pulpy thing beating". Elsewhere, her voice remains icy and calm on the devastating *Thumbs* as she imagines murdering a teenage friend's awful father, pressing against his irises "until they burst".

Musically, the picture is fuller and more detailed than on 2016 debut *No Burden* and its follow-up *Historian*. The driving opener *Hot & Heavy* comes from the same widescreen classic-rock ballpark as The War On Drugs' album *A Deeper Understanding*, which was engineered and also mixed by Everett;

"MY IDENTITY WAS A LITTLE LESS CLEAR TO ME. I JUST RETREATED TO THE PAST TO FIGURE OUT WHO I'VE BEEN THIS WHOLE TIME"

While she drifts between guitars on stage and in the studio, Telecasters have become Dacus' workhorse

First Time zips along with a propulsive energy, swirling synths and some delectable slide guitar; *Cartwheel* is a spellbinding collision of fingerpicked acoustics and moody atmospherics. The eminently diverse set later culminates in *Triple Dog Dare*, a yearning slow-burner that details queer love forbidden by religion and rises to a scorching post-rock denouement. The album's guitar work is of many shades, matched by Dacus's consummate ability to shape nakedly personal memories into universal sentiments.

"I had to give in," says Dacus of her bandmates' encouragement to venture into uncharted stylistic territories. "We made *No Burden* and *Historian* and they have always been ,'Let's just do whatever's best for the songs'. But I had these hang-ups about pianos, synths and acoustic guitars – I don't want people to think we're just an Americana band. There are many more acoustics: we used a 12-string a lot, high-strung, a baritone, classical guitar, we allowed ourselves options. On the first record, I didn't know anything about recording, I'd never played with a band. On *Historian*, I knew what I wanted: big distortion and high contrast between quiet and loud. This album, I wanted to be really washy and nostalgic but not tied to any particular decade."

HOMESICK BLUES

That sense of nostalgia permeates every sun-bleached, retrospective corner of *Home Video*, a record that was both cathartic and agonising for Dacus to write.

"It was a hard switch when I started releasing music," she begins. "My identity went from being a personal project to something publicly observed. I just needed to have a sense of who I was because, once I started to do music, my identity was a little less clear to me. Journalists were making narratives out of my life and even at home on the sidewalk people would come up with their own idea of who I am, so I just retreated to the past to figure out what matters to me, who I've been this whole time."

© David A. Smith / Getty Images

Last time we caught up with Dacus – all the way back in May 2019 ahead of the release of her series of holiday-themed EPs – she spoke of a refusal to "pledge allegiance" to any single guitar brand. On *Home Video*, her and Blizard largely abide by that bold manifesto, although a pair of Telecasters do feature prominently. Dacus leaned on her dual-humbucker American Pro, alongside cameos from the Gretsch White Falcon she's since sold to the Nashville studio and a '67 Gibson SG Special belonging to engineer Scottie Prudhoe. Blizard favoured his American Elite Tele, as well a 1960s Gibson acoustic and a Jerry Jones baritone.

"I played my Tele on maybe half of the electric parts," says Blizard. "It was always very spur of the moment – 'the Tele's not working, let's grab something else'. We'd try three or four different things and pick what works best. We used a few offset Fenders, a 335. But it really is mostly Telecasters."

Recording in a space designed by Dave Mattingly – the man behind Dan Auerbach's Easy Eye Sound and Jack White's Third Man Detroit – with a Neve 8014 console once owned by Billy Corgan taking pride of place, Dacus and Blizard were inspired to conjure fresh sounds from recently reshaped pedalboards.

"The whole time we've been touring, I've accumulated more and more pedals," says Blizard. "At one time, I was using the biggest Pedaltrain, with 15 or 20 pedals on it."

"His board was egregious!" interrupts Dacus, who despite Blizard having recently added Strymon's TimeLine, BigSky and Mobius units to his line-up is fast catching up. "I've got a KTR Klon, which is on almost all the time, an Xotic SP compressor, the Keeley Caverns, the Iron Horse for big distortion, the Longsword, and the Walrus Julia chorus," she says. "I have the most pedals I've ever had. On *No Burden*, I just had a tuner."

The majority of the electric guitar parts were recorded through Blizard's '69 Fender Vibro Champ and '71 Princeton Reverb. But on *Partner In Crime*, Dacus suggested recording directly, with the solo captured using an unorthodox technique.

"Jacob was so mad I made him play DI," she says, dissolving into laughter. "He hated every second of it. He wouldn't make eye contact or talk to me. The solo, I kind of knew what I wanted and Jacob wasn't totally getting there, so I said, 'I'll play the fretboard and you do the strings', a two-man guitar part."

The lack of preciousness from either player and the trust between them is reflected in an easy dynamic that made recording *Home Video* a joyous experience. Dacus has a benchmark for her sessions:

"If I can dance, it's working. If I can't, we have to change something. There was definitely more dancing than ever. Only three times in making a record do we disagree and we'll talk it out for 30 minutes. Those are moments we remember because I'll cry or something. It's underrated how easy it is to get parts we all really love."

Dacus is quick to praise her bandmates too. "Jacob is willing to go anywhere and can go anywhere," she adds. "He's got all the technique but also the brain for good ideas. Working with Jacob and Colin for so long, we've developed a language where we understand each other. In the studio, it's like, 'Yes, yes, go, do this'. Our tastes are the same."

STROKE OF GENIUS

On this album, Dacus let her co-guitarist enjoy the spotlight, contributing only four guitar parts on the record herself. Despite having played the instrument since childhood, when she first picked up a $100 three-quarter-sized Ibanez and later an Epiphone Sheraton II, she suffers excruciating pain in her hands and so limits her playing to live shows and writing.

"I hardly pick up the guitar," she says. "I have this love-hate relationship with it. My hands physically hurt. I don't know whether I have arthritis but if I play for too long I get sharp pain between my knuckles. But I've been writing a lot on this half-size nylon-string acoustic that was, like, $100. It's easy to write on because I feel like I don't have to impress it."

Modest to a fault about her playing, Dacus is equally self-deprecating concerning her role in Boygenius, the band she shares with friends Julien Baker and Phoebe Bridgers. The trio released a stellar six-track self-titled EP in 2018 that showcases their complementary vocal and guitar talents, and Baker and Bridgers feature twice on *Home Video*, joining Dacus in an aching three-part harmony on the track *Please Stay* and bursting into laughter and applause at the end of *Going Going Gone*.

"Julien and Phoebe are both better guitarists than me," says Dacus. "I have the least to offer. For me, guitar is a functional thing. I like not knowing what I'm playing because I have to search on the fretboard for the sounds in my head. Phoebe is a great player with really good tone but also keeps her parts pretty simple. Julien prides herself on being a very good guitarist and I feel she enjoys guitar more than singing and being a frontperson. It's nice that we're all at different levels. We also have a similar sense of humour. When we think something's funny on guitar, there's a good chance we'll keep it on a recording. We don't want to take ourselves too seriously."

With all three members releasing albums in the past 12 months, individual touring commitments may make a full-length Boygenius record impossible in 2021. But Dacus says they're open to reconvening when time allows.

"WE'RE THE BIGGEST BOYGENIUS FANS. WE JUST WANT EXCUSES TO HANG OUT AND MAKE SPACES FOR EACH OTHER IN OUR LIVES"

"I guess there have been discussions but there's no plan. We text all the time about wanting to get together. We're the biggest Boygenius fans. We're all doing our own thing right now but who's to say if we'll regroup. We just want excuses to hang out and make spaces for each other in our lives and our work."

Until then, Dacus has live dates in the US that will keep her busy throughout the autumn, while COVID-19 has granted her the unusual perspective of nearly two years of reflection on *Home Video* prior to its release. She's exorcised a lot of ghosts on her third album and, as she said back on *Historian*, she hopes the songs will begin to feel like covers in the coming years, their emotional sting drawn. Any pain she endured in stirring these memories has been rewarded with the most finely crafted, diverse and affecting record of her career to date.

"*No Burden* was for my family and friends," she says. "*Historian* was kind of for other people. *Home Video* feels like it's for me. It was music that I made for myself. It's fun to be able to share it but it kind of already did its job by me completing it. I found out a lot about myself while I was making it."

After two albums of making music for other people, Dacus focussed on making an album just for her on *Home Video*

***Home Video* is out now via Matador Records**

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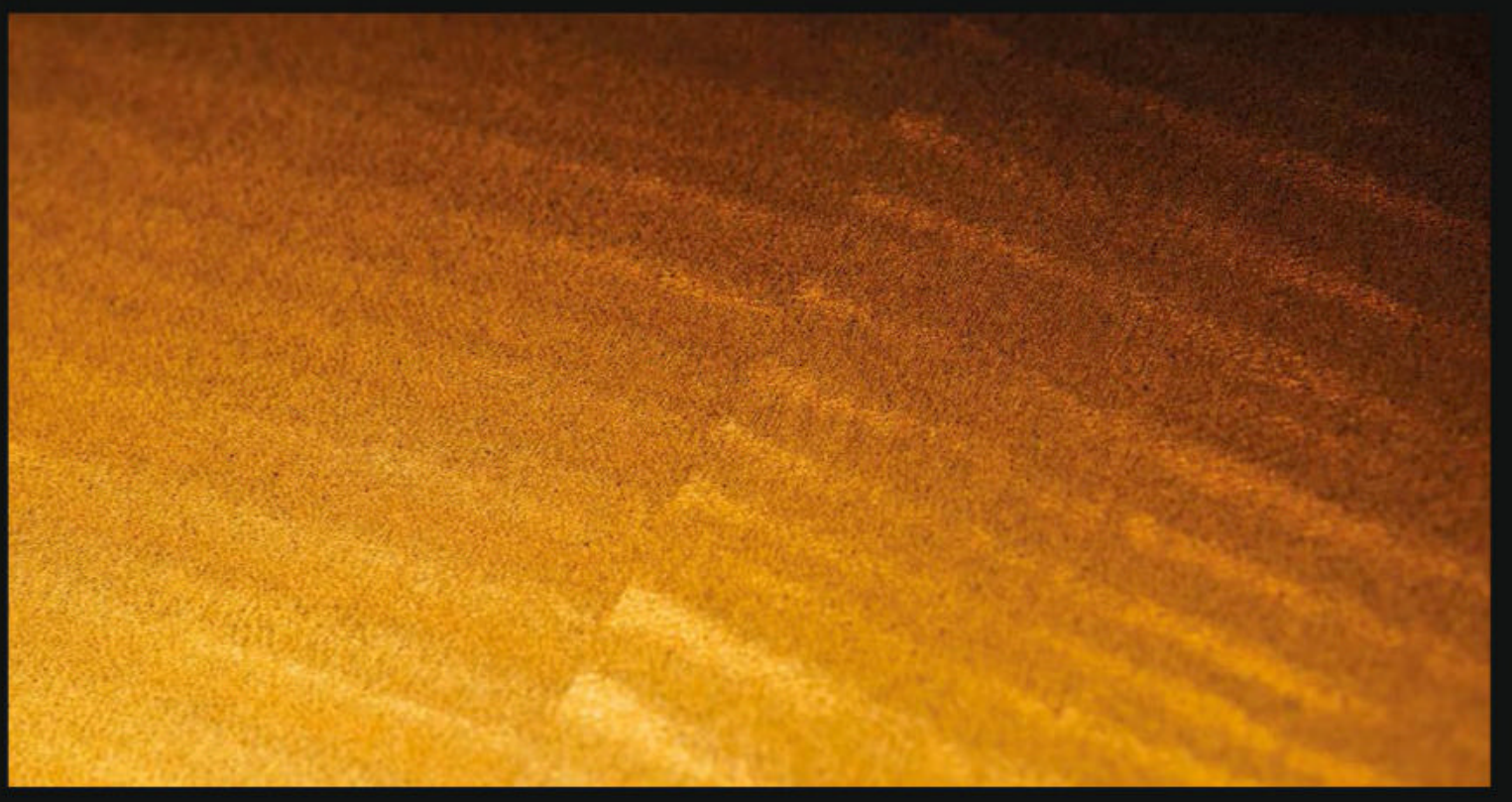
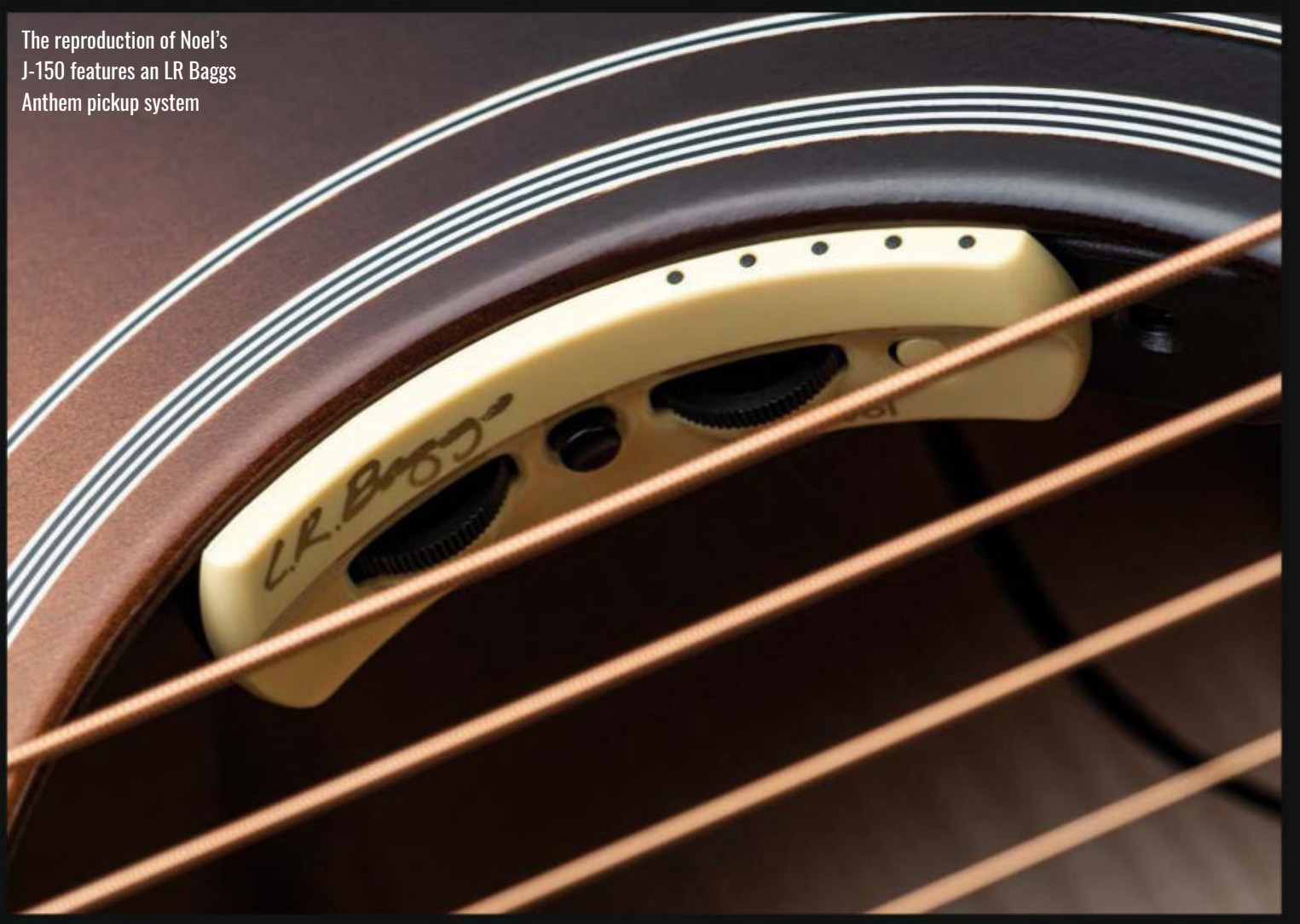
THE MONEY SHOT

GIBSON NOEL GALLAGHER J-150

A recreation of the sunburst Gibson acoustic that's been at the Oasis songwriter's side for more than two decades

PHOTOGRAPHY ELEANOR JANE





The reproduction of Noel's J-150 features an LR Baggs Anthem pickup system

Back in December 2019, in an interview in these very pages, Noel Gallagher revealed that he was collaborating with Gibson on a signature version of the J-150 that's been his go-to acoustic for 20 years. After being teased on social media in March 2021, the Gibson Noel Gallagher J-150 has finally arrived, complete with Adidas sticker and a reproduction of the handwritten lyrics for the Oasis hit *Little By Little* – the 2002 promo video for which saw Noel's original guitar make its first of many high-profile appearances.

Limited to just 200 pieces and priced at £3,799, the guitar features a Sitka spruce top, figured maple back and sides, and a hand-rubbed Historic Thin finish. Speaking to Gibson, Gallagher revealed that he was shocked by how close the model is to his original. "This looks like it looked the day that I bought it," said the High Flying Birds star. "I was blown away by the finish on it. It looks amazing. The back of this looks better than the back of mine. To me, that makes me want to pick it up and do something with it. It sounds exactly like mine. Exactly. It's a brilliant reproduction."

The distinctive Adidas trefoil decal was reproduced with permission from the German sports brand and comes in the case so fans can decide whether to stick it to the guitar or not. The original came from a sheet of stickers that Noel bought in an Amsterdam junk shop, with its position on his guitar coming at the suggestion of his daughter Anaïs.

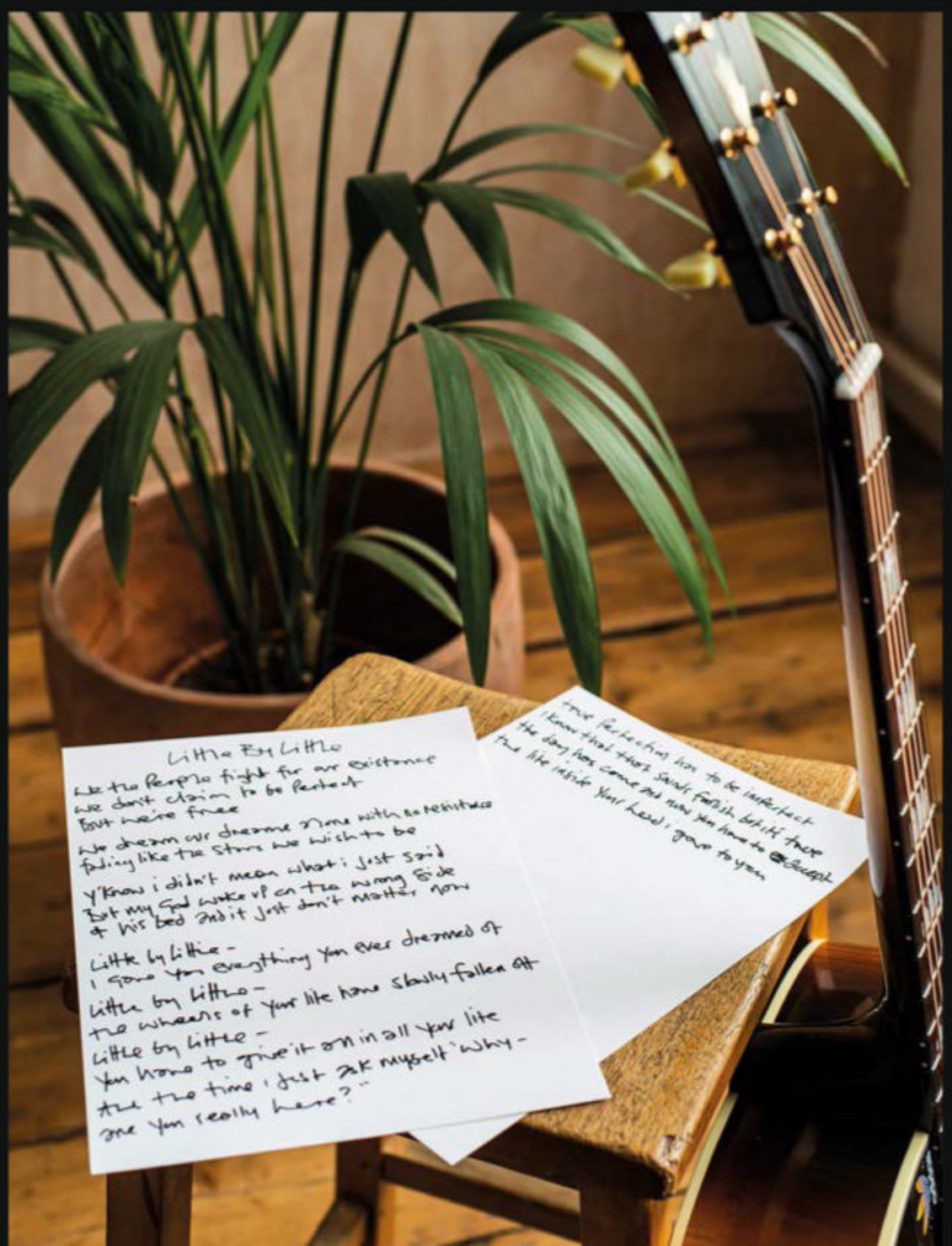
"When I think back to the songs I've written and the amount of time I've spent holding this guitar, it just becomes part of you," Gallagher told Gibson. "I've played this guitar in stadiums, I've played it in pubs, I've played it at home, I've played it round the fucking campfire at Glastonbury – I've took it everywhere. There's just something about it. I find it very, very easy to write songs on this guitar."

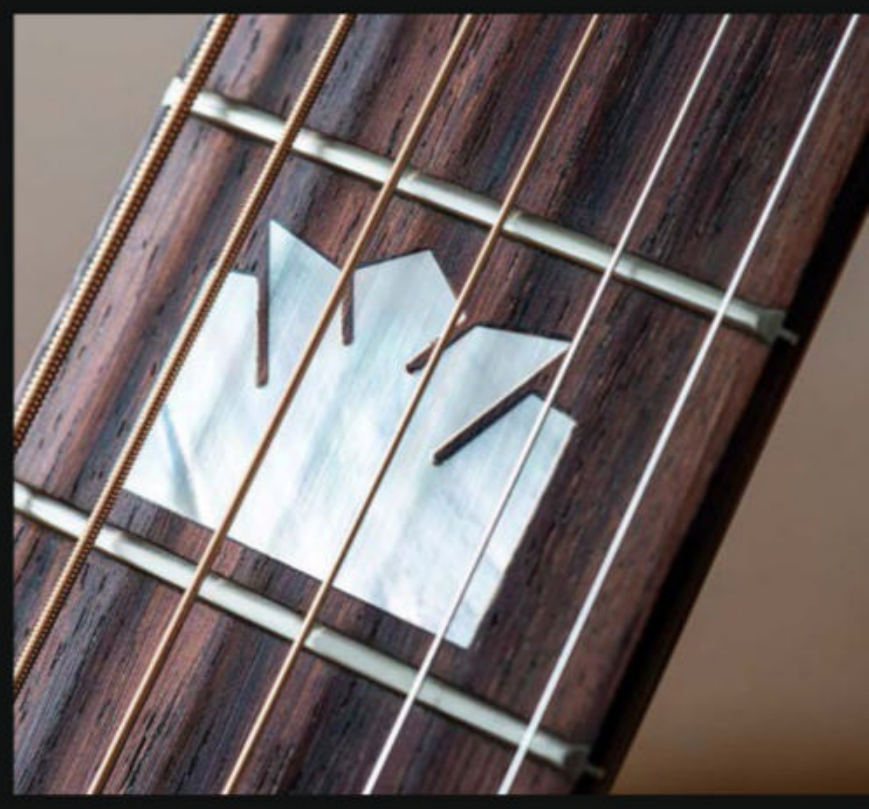
Each instrument comes with a repro Adidas trefoil decal copied from Gallagher's original

The project was masterminded by Gibson Brands' EU head of marketing, Lee Bartram. "Noel Gallagher's music not only defined a generation but it also became the foundation to a way of life for many around the world," said Bartram. "Truly great music has the capability to transport you to a moment in your life – a snapshot in time, one of life's reference points. Noel's music does that for millions who listen to his songs and travel to somewhere else, somewhere they believe they can be a rock 'n' roll star… even if it's for that briefest of moments. It has been an honour to work with such an iconic artist and bringing this project to life is a small token of thanks for that music – and the belief that comes with it." G

Head to youtube.com/theguitarmagazine to hear the Gibson Noel Gallagher J-150 in action and visit gibson.com and noelgallagher.com for more

Gibson


Little By Little
We the People fight for our existance
we don't claim to be Perfect
But we're free
We dream our dreams alone with no resistance
falling like the stars we wish to be
Y'know i didn't mean what i just said
But my God woke up on the wrong side
of his bed and it just don't matter now
Little by little -
I gave you everything you ever dreamed of
Little by little -
the wheels of your life have slowly fallen off
Little by little -
You have to give it on in all your life
All the time i just ask myself "why -
are you really here?"
true perfection has to be imperfect
i know that that sounds foolish, but it's true
the day has come and now you have to accept
the day has come and now you have to accept
that like inside your head i gave to you



Style NOEL GALLAGHER
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TOUR DE FORCE

WORDS ED OLESZKO
PHOTOGRAPHY ELEANOR JANE

In addition to being a member of Pendulum, Peredur ap Gwynedd has performed alongside a laundry list of pop stars and enjoys a sideline as a TV cycling commentator. We head to the Welsh guitarist's London studio to check out the tools of his trade

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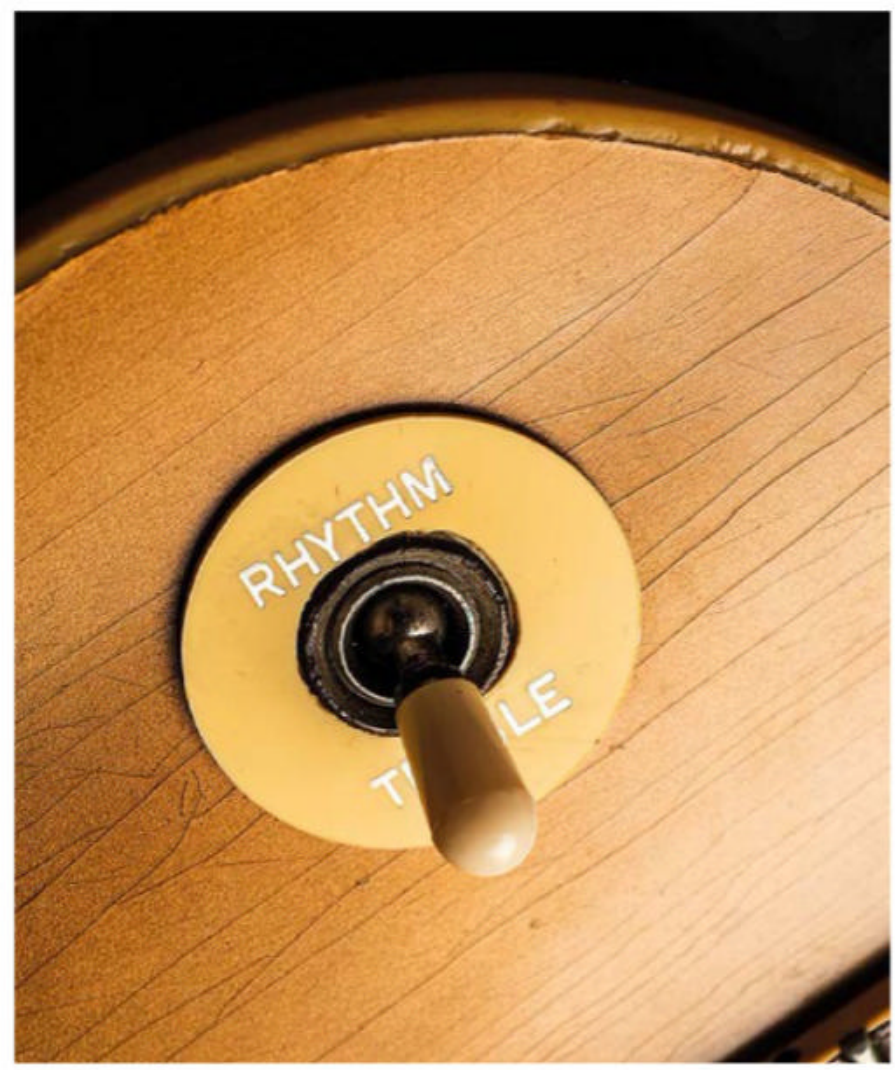

In a studio chock full of modern recording equipment and with walls adorned with gold and silver discs, it's no surprise to see flightcases that wear the battle scars and decaying airline stickers from countless world tours. Our host is Peredur ap Gwynedd – Perry for short – the Pontypool-born guitarist best known for his work with Australian electronic rock act Pendulum.

Though he has collaborated with artists from all over the world, early inspiration came courtesy of a guitarist from much closer to home. "Tich Gwilym was where it all started for me," says Perry. "He was everybody's hero growing up around Wales where I'm from. Apart from him, hearing *Back In Black* for the first time was transformative. Even now you can't fail to be impressed! It still sounds fresh over 40 years later. I think my cousin played it for me, along with *The Number Of The Beast*. After hearing those, it was like, 'This is what I'm going to do with my life!'"

Growing up in a musical family kickstarted a lifelong affinity for the guitar, and Perry was fortunate enough to have access to acoustic instruments in the family home. "My parents always played acoustics," he says. "I've still got a 1968 DeGeorgio Brazilian acoustic which my mum had, it sounds lovely. My dad had a steel-string guitar. I started messing about with that about age seven or eight, then at about 13 I picked it up properly and started listening to things like Iron Maiden and Gary Moore, and started working out licks. The lick on *Back In Black* itself, the pentatonic run, I realised was the same notes as *I Love Rock 'N' Roll* by Joan Jett & The Blackhearts, and found out about the pentatonic blues scale and just went from there really."

Though initially self-taught using magazines, Perry also studied music at school and took some piano lessons when he was younger, which gave him a solid foundation and meant he "knew what the dots were".

ABOVE Perry swapped out his Honeyburst 1995 Les Paul Classic's original pickups for Seymour Duncan Antiquities to tame its aggressive edge

THIS SPREAD Perry saved this 1969 Goldtop Les Paul Deluxe from the hands of Steven Seagal

THIS PAGE This Grey Black PRS Custom 24 is the one guitar that Perry couldn't live without when on the road with Pendulum

OPPOSITE Perry is also the proud owner of this PRS Custom 24 and SE Hollowbody

At about 15, he started having guitar lessons, which would eventually lead to a degree in music from Goldsmiths in London. "It was lot of contemporary jazz guitar and a little bit of classical," he recalls. "I wasn't very good at it but it served me well."

FASTEN YOUR SEATBELT

Perry considers hard work and a few lucky breaks core to his achievements, which have thus far involved a range of unexpected people and places but began in earnest with a role as a guitarist in Norman Cook's Beats International collective.

"That was my first proper gig," says Perry. "Playing live guitar in a dance band certainly helped me with later gigs, namely Pendulum. From there I did various bits in the session world, a lot of TV. *iDot* for Welsh TV channel S4C, recording lots of music for adverts globally – sessions, gigs, anything. I was really lucky!"

Sometimes a session player receives a call that comes to define their whole career. Perry remembers his. "In 1997 I was asked to join Natalie Imbruglia's band through a friend of mine who was asked to put a band together for her," he says. "We just knew she was off [Australian soap opera] *Neighbours*…"

Imbruglia had just released her debut single *Torn*, which went on to become a worldwide hit, topping the US Billboard Airplay chart for 14 weeks. Her debut album *Left Of The Middle* would sell more than seven million copies globally.

"It was all bonkers when *Torn* came out," says Perry. "All of sudden she was the biggest artist on the planet. Countless world tours, five-star hotels… we were treated like royalty, she was number one everywhere! The UK, USA, Australia. That first album campaign was 18 months of solid touring, circumnavigating the world, working every day, multiple awards, private jets, gigs, festivals. Crazy times. Initially, I remember getting the single and thinking, 'Yeah I'll get a few months' work out of this'. Low and behold, I got nine years' work out of it!"

When Imbruglia took time off, her band stayed together and backed other artists, notably Sophie Ellis Bextor, in about 2001. Following that, Perry landed a role as guitarist for French singer Myléne Falmer, which led to memorable gigs in Paris.

"It was lots of fun," says Perry. "It was a tour but in one venue with a huge stage set. I remember I had a huge hydraulic platform that went up and down, I was doing rock horns all the time. It was like being a kid!"

PRO TOOLS

Perry picked up his gorgeous Honeyburst 1995 Les Paul Classic from London's Denmark Street while on tour with Imbruglia in 1998. Its electronics, however, proved a little too aggressive for his needs.

"I basically wanted to get as close to a Burst sound as possible without paying £250,000," he says. "I love the flame on the top but it's not too garish or flash. The original pickups were far too powerful for the stuff I was doing with Natalie so I replaced them with a pair of Seymour Duncan Antiquities, which to me are an excellent reproduction of Gibson PAF pickups from the 1950s. These ones were handmade and apparently they aged the covers by leaving them on the factory roof for a year. It's had a headstock break but to be honest I think it sounds better since being repaired."

While playing with Imbruglia, Perry paired his Honeyburst Les Paul with a 100-watt Hiwatt amp, which itself has turned a few heads.

"It's a really early one with the plexi logo, apparently one of the very first ever made in Dave Reeves' garage," says Perry. "It's loud as hell but has such an amazing punchy tone. We were playing on [BBC TV show] *Later… With Jools Holland* and Page and Plant were on the same show. Page sent his tech over to ask me about my Hiwatt as he'd never seen another one and thought that he had the only surviving one in the world. He offered to buy it but I respectfully declined. I toured with it all over the world. It's crazy when you think about it now but at the time it was just a great amp."

Perry's other Les Paul is a 1969 Deluxe with a Goldtop finish that narrowly escaped landing in the hands of another famous owner. "It's player's grade with a few cracks and replaced bits but it's a great-sounding guitar," he says. "The neck is superb and the action is so low. I bought it in Glasgow years ago while I was up there doing some recording for an artist that was looking for something more vintage-sounding than the guitars I had with me. In the store, they said it was reserved for Steven Seagal, who was on tour and had been in to play it the day before. I offered to buy it there and then and luckily they accepted!"

THE PENDULUM SWINGS

With riff-based rock music being his biggest guitar influence from an early age, when the call came in 2006 to add some guitar tracks to a song by dance-rock crossover act Pendulum, Perry jumped at it.

Soon after, he was a full-time member of the band playing on hit albums and touring the world.

"It's been some of the most amazing gigs ever," he says. "Playing before Marilyn Manson and Slipknot at Download festival was a particular highlight but there have been so many amazing tours and shows."

Though Perry is known for adding big riffs to Pendulum's music, he brings much more to the table than that, includin his penchant for ambient, atmospheric music. "I do bring a lot of that into certain bits of Pendulum," he says. "There's lots of atmospheric and textural stuff on the records – that's me."

Asked how he creates those atmospheric washes and textures, Perry lets some secrets slip, pinpointing multiple delays, reverbs and compression. Lots of compression. "Compression has become so vitally important to me over the last few years," he says. "20 years ago I didn't understand it but I started messing around with a yellow Line 6 pedal – the same series as the big green DL4 delay but the yellow distortion one [the DM4 Distortion Modeler]. It has a setting called Boost/Comp and the compression in that is just beautiful. I got really into it then and now I use it all the time."

THIS SPREAD "I'm a huge fan of early 1980s Japanese-made Squier JV Stratocasters and I've collected them for years," says Perry. "But in terms of playability and for recording, the PRS Silver Sky just beats them all"

These days, Perry gets most of his effects from a Line 6 Helix, which has slimmed down his setup dramatically. "It's superb," he says. "I used to have a big pedalboard with separate pedals but the getting Helix recently has been utterly transformative. It's phenomenally good."

When quizzed about how his setup works for such a huge rock show as Pendulum's, with complex lighting and video to factor in alongside the musical performance, Perry revels that it's not as simple as plugging into an amp or two and hitting some rock poses like the good old days.

"With Pendulum, we used to run the show from one big MIDI brain that controlled everything – the backing tracks, syncing up the lights and video, cues, etc. But now we're all separated from that. We all still play to a click track but with the Helix, I can save all my tempos, delay times, etc, and it's perfect for the wide range of tones and sounds I use. The lights and cues are still computer-controlled and synced to the click. Most big bands do this now, as it's the most professional way to ensure consistency at big shows. It's essential to sync up the video and lights to timecode. It also makes quick changeovers at festivals much easier."

GRANITE RIGS

Delivering a stream of rock and metal riffs to massive stadium and festival audiences while intertwined with Pendulum's complex electronic rhythms means Perry needs an amplifier capable of classic tones but also one that comes loaded with modern features. For such a tough task, he turns to a German maker with a reputation for quality.

"I used big Hughes & Kettner heads for years," he says. "Walls of massive speaker cabs. It was so loud but so much fun. My rig weighed over a ton on its own." Since then, Perry has adopted Hughes & Kettner's smaller TubeMeister 18 and GrandMeister 36 heads, alongside a few smaller cabs, which makes travel much easier. "I don't think I've played a better amp than the GrandMeister 36," he adds. "It's amazing. That and my Helix – a small, portable rig but it covers everything sound-wise and is the best tone I've ever had."

For Pendulum duties, if there's one guitar that Perry couldn't live without – and one that he's most associated with – it's his Grey Black PRS Custom 24 Floyd Rose, which has received its fair share of mods.

"I'm not a fan of Bigsby's," says Perry. "They just don't stay in tune. For me, as I hit the guitar so hard, the Floyd Rose is perfect. The intonation is spot-on when recording and live it stays in tune amazingly well. I've modified it slightly with a PRS HFS Treble pickup in the bridge and a Vintage Bass in the neck to tame the guitar slightly. I also replaced the five-way with a three-way and push/pull pot on the tone control to split the humbuckers. It just makes more sense to me that way live and now I have six sounds rather than the five it came with. I have a few other PRS guitars and the consistency is amazing. The green Custom 24 I use a lot. The SE Hollowbody is like a brilliant ES-335, and the Silver Sky is the best Strat!"

THIS PAGE Perry's fiery Peavey HP Special saw a lot of action during his early days with Pendulum

OPPOSITE "Simon Farmer from Gus Guitars is a genius," says Perry. "He made those cool guitars for Prince. This is one of his earliest guitars, serial number 002. It was built 25 years ago and still looks futuristic. He makes all these parts himself"

OVERLEAF This wonderfully aged 1931 Dobro Angelus resonator was once sold at Hessy's of Liverpool – a shop famously frequented by The Beatles

Perry used a Peavey HP Special during Pendulum's early days too, which he says is especially versatile with the addition of the Graph Tech Ghost Floyd Rose system for acoustic tones. Look online and you can find a clip of him playing the guitar on *Propane Nightmares* at Glastonbury 2011, a fine showcase for the HP's electric and acoustic capabilities.

Before we depart, this most modernistic of guitarists pulls out the oldest instrument he owns, which is also one of his favourites: a 1931 Dobro Angelus resonator. "I mainly use it for slide," says Perry. "It's got such an incredible tone for recording, loads of vibe. There's a Hessy's of Liverpool stamp on it, meaning it was once sold at the famous store where The Beatles bought most of their instruments." Like its owner, it has a strong musical pedigree indeed.

Pendulum's new EP *Elemental* is out now. For more, visit pendulum.com and follow @perryguitar666 on Instagram

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HOW TO BUY A VINTAGE GRETSCH GUITAR

Buying a vintage Gretsch is not without its risks. There's non-originality and outright forgery to consider, as well as structural issues that can compromise looks and playability. But after reading this guide, you'll know a good one when you see it

WORDS HUW PRICE
PHOTOGRAPHY ELEANOR JANE

Although vintage Gretsch guitars can be quite valuable, few models command the kind of stratospheric prices of iconic Gibsons and Fenders. As a consequence, Gretsch fakes are rarer beasts because the risk-reward ratio is somewhat less attractive to the crooks and swindlers. Nevertheless, there are forgeries out there. But far more common are Gretsch instruments that have had parts swapped for upgrades or running repairs.

Serial numbers can be used to date Gretsch guitars. However, some printed sources have been shown to be inaccurate and, when internal labels go missing, the numbers are often lost too. The best approach, then, is to obtain a really good reference book and cross-reference serial numbers with model features that pertain to specific years. But the unfortunate fact of the matter is that, with Gretsch, sometimes 'approximately' is as close as you'll get.

In this guide, we'll discuss some of the key features, as well as a few of the common problems that afflict vintage Gretsch guitars, including weakened neck joints and rotten binding. We'll also arm you with the information you need to identify a great deal.

THE NECK JOINT

This is the most common issue with vintage Gretsch instruments, so much so that if you're in the market for one, you should probably factor the cost of a neck reset into your calculations. You may get lucky but be sure to play it safe rather than blow your budget on an expensive guitar that's barely playable.

U.S.PAT.
28923
GRETSCH

TOP A gap at the neck join may mean it needs a reset for optimal playability

ABOVE When an internal label goes missing, the serial number is often lost too

Why is this the case? The constant string pull and gradual deterioration of the glue bond over the years can result in the neck shifting in its pocket. Always look out for a gap between the body and heel; even a paper width can compromise playability. Examine the bridge too because, if it's set as low as it can go on the base, you can be sure there's a problem.

Set neck joints coming loose is not unusual. Martin has been aware of the problem for so long that its necks and bodies have always been finished separately to make the inevitable neck reset a smooth process. The core difference between Martin and the Gretsch company in the 1950s and 60s is that Martin took care to do the job properly in the first place. Like Martin, Gretsch used a dovetail joint until about 1961. Martin, however, cut the dovetail and neck block with enough accuracy that tiny amounts of wood could be shaved from the sides of the dovetail until the neck could be pressed tightly into the block.

When we removed the neck of our 1960 Gretsch Anniversary model, we discovered a 5mm thick mahogany shim that was used to fill the gap and centre the neck. If you think that's bad, another Gretsch-owning friend discovered cardboard shims in his neck pocket.

Things improved when Gretsch transitioned to a mortise and tenon neck joint in about 1961. This increased the surface area for the glue, and the securing screw that had hitherto passed through the heel was moved to the side of the cutaway.

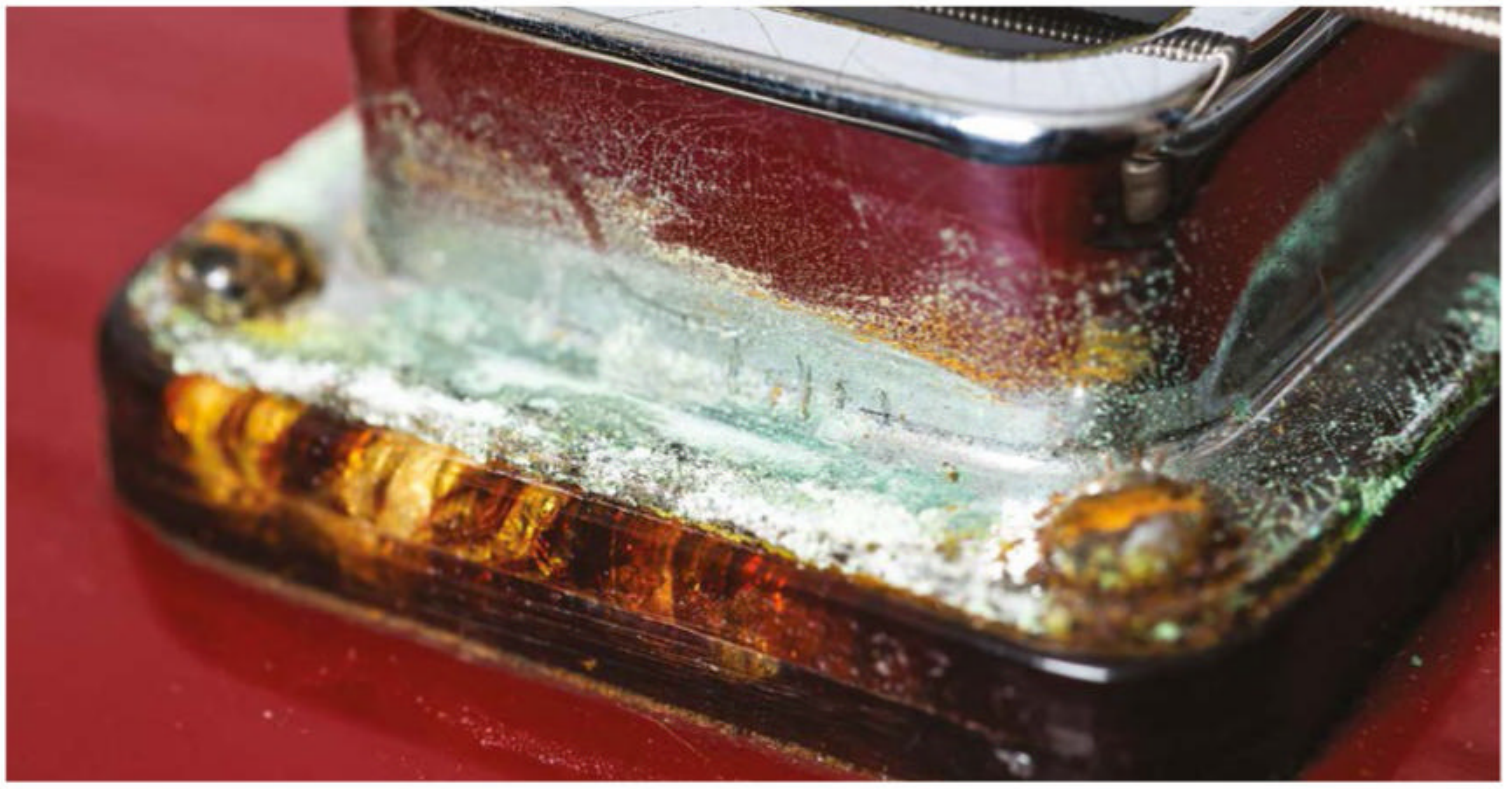
Gretsch neck resets can be tricky and expensive but if you're considering buying a Gretsch that has already had a neck reset and the job has been professionally done, consider that a plus point.

BINDING ROT

Look closely at photographs of vintage Gretsch instruments and you will often see binding that has cracked, turned brown or even crumbled away completely. Theories about why this happens include the use of unsuitable plastics and incompatible glues. But nobody knows for sure the cause of the condition commonly referred to as binding rot.

It's ironic that vintage Gretsch models in otherwise excellent condition often have the most severe cases of binding rot. When a guitar is cosseted and kept in a case, the off-gassing of the binding material is contained within the case and causes the binding to deteriorate. It also attacks pickguards, plastic peghead overlays and metal parts.

This phenomenon is not confined to Gretsch instruments. Old Gibson and Epiphone pickguards – the celluloid faux-tortoiseshell types – sometimes suffer the same fate. Replacing a pickguard, however, is relatively cheap. Replacing Gretsch binding while preserving the original finish is a highly specialised procedure, though it has been suggested that binding rot can be stopped and stabilised using Super Glue.



TOP This 6120's neck binding has avoided the rot thus far

LEFT Gretsch used celluloid risers for DeArmond pickups and they had a tendency to deteriorate. Off-gassing can damage the lacquer and the metal parts, as seen here. Fortunately, replacement risers are available

Many vintage Gretsch guitars will be completely free of binding rot and, if you want to keep them that way, you should hang them on the wall or keep them on stands rather than locking them away in cases. But that's no bad thing because they'll be more likely to get played that way and Gretsch guitars don't exactly make bad-looking wall ornaments.

DOUBLING UP

Some players find the central placement of single pickups on Gibson's 'budget' thinline cutaways annoying and, unless you're prepared to live with an ugly hole in the top of your guitar, converting an ES-225 or ES-330 into a twin-pickup guitar isn't an option. Fortunately, on Gretsch's more affordable single-pickup models, the Brooklyn company was never that cruel… or perhaps just not that canny.

The Gretsch Anniversary model was produced in huge numbers during the vintage era in one and two-pickup configurations, known as the Single and Double Anniversary, respectively. The Single Anniversary always had a neck pickup so it's very easy to add a bridge unit. The Double Anniversary had two switches – one for pickup selection and the other for tone control – but more on that later. They also had individual volume controls adjacent to the treble-side f-hole to augment the master volume on the cutaway horn.

Experts can sometimes identify full-on Single to Double Anniversary conversions by the switch placement. The switches may appear to be a little too close together but then again, Gretsch could be inconsistent with these things. Model numbers, then, remain the most accurate signifier, with the sunburst and green Single Anniversaries being the 6124 and 6125 respectively, and the Double Anniversaries designated as 6117 and 6118. Always check the label.

ABOVE This double-cutaway 6120 belongs to Gabrielle Aplin and was purchased from Norman's Rare Guitars

ABOVE RIGHT David Gilmour's White Penguin sold for $447,000 at Christie's in 2019

For its first three years, the 6119 Tennessean had a single pickup too: a Filter'Tron in the bridge position. With its translucent red finish, black pickguard, pared-back aesthetic and factory Bigsby, some think it the coolest of all the Gretsch single-cutaways. Many have been converted too, with a pickup added in the neck. This conversion impacts the value of the Tennessean more than it does the Anniversary. But as long as you understand that you're buying a modded guitar – and that is reflected in the price – these can be good value for money. Most would argue that both models are improved by the added versatility of a second pickup.

CONVERSIONS AND FAKES

The Filter'Tron-equipped Tennesseans and Anniversaries produced between 1958 and 1960 have a hidden feature that makes them particularly desirable: their trestle bracing makes them structurally identical to the revered 6120 model of the period. As a consequence, some Tennesseans and Anniversaries have been stripped and converted into 6120s. It's the Gretsch equivalent of turning pre-'57 Goldtop Les Pauls into faux Bursts. If you find a 6120 for sale with a rosewood fingerboard and no zero fret, assume it's an Anniversary conversion. And if there are Filter'Tron pickups but no trestle bracing, then it's definitely a conversion.

Look out for oddly placed switches and fretboards that stop short of the neck pickup too. A well-done Anniversary or Tennessean conversion will also need a new peghead overlay with binding, fretboard binding and re-shaped and bound f-holes.

The single-pickup Streamliner, especially '57 and '58 models, is also a strong candidate for 6120 conversions. In 1957, both shared the same hump-block markers, bound fretboard and DeArmond Dynasonic pickups. In 1958, the Streamliner acquired trestle bracing and a single Filter'Tron, which makes them easy to convert.

The real danger lies in big-budget Gretsches. It's not unheard of for Country Clubs and Electromatics to be converted into White Falcons and for White Penguins to be created from donor Duo Jets. Duo Jets have also been converted to Round Ups.

So long as everything is above board, you can score a fantasy Gretsch that's made from vintage wood and comes with vintage hardware and electronics. Unfortunately, some of these guitars have been converted or sold with the intention to deceive, so be careful out there.

FACTORY NECK SWAPS

At the time when vintage guitars were merely secondhand, some manufacturers exercised a policy of replacement rather than repair. Guitars with failing neck joints or snapped headstocks that were sent back to the Gretsch factory for repair often ended up with a new neck straight off the production line. Because Gretsch features were continually updated, this can cause a lot of confusion. Early 1950s DeArmond-loaded Duo Jets show up with later 1950s necks, complete with hump-block or thumbnail markers rather than blocks and block logos rather than the coveted script logo.

This can adversely affect a guitar's value but it can also make an otherwise expensive vintage guitar a little more affordable. Again, so long as you're aware of the history and it's reflected in the price, a vintage-era factory neck replacement doesn't have to be a deal-breaker.

HARDWARE

Gretsch fitted the Melita bridge to guitars in the first half of the 1950s – sometimes fixed but usually floating – complete with saddles that were individually adjustable for intonation. From 1955, factory fitted Bigsbys were combined with Bigsby's own compensated aluminium bridge.

In 1958, Gretsch's Space Control bridge replaced the Melita, while Bigsby-equipped models got a compensated bar bridge with square ends. This was changed to a non-compensated bar bridge with rounded ends in 1959. However, Gretsch bridges often turn up on the wrong model, and guitars such as the Rambler, Clipper and Convertible had a rosewood bridge.

Although Bigsby tailpieces became almost synonymous with Gretsch guitars, they were only fitted by special request in the early 1950s

TOP The Melita bridge may provide individual intonation adjustment but it's not particularly comfortable on the palm

ABOVE G-arrow knobs arrived in 1957 and remained in use until the late 1960s

ABOVE This '56 Duo Jet wears DeArmond Dynasonics and a Melita bridge. The Dynasonic pickups were superseded by Filter'Trons but remain popular with rockabilly players

or retrofitted by owners such as Cliff Gallup. Then, in 1955, Chet Atkins persuaded Gretsch to fit a Bigsby B6 with a fixed arm to the 6120.

A 'breakaway' hinge was tried briefly before the swivel arm arrived in 1956. The slotted arm-stud changed to a crosshead stud in 1958, to accompany a slimmer stainless-steel arm. Gretsch introduced the V-cut Gretsch-branded Bigsby in 1959.

Most non-vibrato guitars had the G-cutout tailpiece, which was five inches long for small-bodied models and 6.25 inches for the big hollowbodies. Exceptions include the Round Up's belt buckle tailpiece and the Cadillac G tailpiece of the White Falcon and White Penguin.

Smooth-topped knurled metal knobs arrived in 1953, with a pointer arrow added in 1955. In 1957, this changed to an arrow piercing a letter G, a design that continued until the late 1960s.

Most vintage Gretsch parts are fairly easy to find and relatively affordable. But open-gear Waverly tuners with rounded buttons can be a problem. Many of them were swapped out because they weren't particularly good and they have never been reissued. At present, no modern equivalents have screw holes that line up perfectly.

ELECTRONICS

Three types of pickups were mostly used in the 1950s and 1960s: DeArmond Dynasonics, Filter'Trons and HiLo'Trons. Others included the Super'Tron, Filter'Trons adapted for stereo and the shortlived Clipper Transitional. Unlike Gibson and Fender, Gretsch refrained from messing with its winning pickup formulas – until new owners Baldwin introduced cheaper ceramic magnets in 1970, that is.

There is a way to tell if a dark and rough-looking magnet is alnico or ceramic. Take a file and make a couple of passes. If you can expose shiny metal, then it's alnico. Apparently ceramic magnets don't conduct electricity, so a multimeter could be used to test them too.

There's no great mystique among vintage Gretsch fans about 1950s Filter'Trons or early 1960s HiLo'Trons because there's very little to distinguish them, both visually or sonically. That said, the earliest Filter'Trons had plain covers, with "Pat. Applied For" appearing in 1959. By the end of 1960, the covers were stamped and had patent number stamps. Some earlier bridge-pickup covers were taller than the neck-pickup covers, with wood shims between the baseplate and the magnet.

Vintage buyers without much Gretsch experience should also be aware of the 'mud switch'. Gretsch intended it as a three-way tone control offering a straight-through option in the middle and two degrees of preset treble roll-off. In practice though, it was a great idea poorly executed. Both roll-off settings eliminated far too much treble and it's now regarded as acceptable to replace the original capacitors with more useable values.

FURTHER READING

Take stock of the information across these pages if you're ever looking to acquire a vintage Gretsch. For a more general guide to buying vintage guitars, including insights from an expert panel featuring obsessive collectors, experienced vintage dealers and guitar techs who have seen it all, head to *Guitar.com*. While you are there, don't forget to check out our six-part series on converting a vintage Gretsch Anniversary model to 6120 specifications that covers a neck reset, applying flame maple veneers, refinishing and plenty more besides. If that isn't enough, you'll also find an exploration of how the best modern replicas from boutique makers compare to vintage Filter'Tron pickups.

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THE GREATEST AMP OF ALL

Guitar effects would be pretty pointless if we never had amps to use them with, and this month Josh Scott wants to talk about one very important amp in particular...

WORDS JOSH SCOTT

Last month, I said that my favourite amp is my all-original 1959 Fender Bassman. This month, I'm going to explain why. The Bassman demands attention by way of its yellow tweed covering, aged and abused thanks to more than 60 years' of use. When it's on, its 45 watts of power give you massive clean tones that can stand up next to any drummer, plus beautiful tube saturation when pushed to high volumes. The amp also accepts overdrive and fuzz pedals as if they were part of its very DNA. Instead of sporting one speaker like most amps of its era, the Bassman boasts four blue-label 10-inch speakers that are as loud as they look and are positioned perfectly within the 23-inch cabinet, ensuring that it can fill a room without having to be mic'd up.

Go on, plug in any guitar you want – you'll have trouble finding a bad sound using the amp's six simple controls. Notes will fall effortlessly from your hands and into your ears thanks to the ideal bass response and the most balanced high end I've ever heard.

From a design perspective, the Fender Bassman is legendary – and for good reason. This is the major evolutionary step forward that carried us from the lunchbox-sized 1930s Rickenbacker amps that barely amplified beyond natural projection to the refrigerator-sized amp stacks used by Jimi Hendrix and others during the late 60s. The Bassman is everything an amp should be but it's also more than that: it is a living, breathing organism that lives to tell a story.

This amplifier, more than any other, occupies a pivotal place in history, with the infancy of 1950s jingle-jangle rock 'n' roll about to collide with the purpose and angst of the 1960s rock invasion. There is a reason that this particular amp is one of the most sought after of all time and, in my opinion, it goes beyond tone. This amp is a physical representation of the sonic transformation happening at the dawn of guitar's greatest age. You could even call it the Cambrian explosion of the electrified guitar – yeah, I'm throwing some heavy-duty scientific terms at you today, just roll with it – but, like all other great inventions, it began with an idea.

Josh Scott's favourite thing to run his cornucopia of pedals through is a 1959 Bassman like the one above

THE RADIO REPAIR MAN

It's an oft-repeated fact that Leo Fender was a mechanic and radio repair technician, not a musician. But he was no average repairman, that's for sure. The spark of electronic creativity had gripped Leo at a young age and he was always tinkering and inventing in search of his next stellar idea. Indeed, so dedicated was he to electronic innovation that Leo dated the establishment of his radio repair business all the way back to 1922, when he became obsessed with radio electronics at age 13.

By 1946, he wore overalls almost every day and just loved to build things. Even though he couldn't play an instrument, he enjoyed live music. He lived in the Los Angeles area and fell in love with the Texas swing bands that toured through Orange County and played the local club scene.

Even better, Leo's presence in and around this scene meant that he witnessed jazz, blues and country merge into a new genre called rock 'n' roll. He was the right person in the right place at the right time, positioned to make his mark on music history.

Before he got into guitars, Leo serviced theatre amplification systems for local clubs and venues, developing a deep understanding of how they worked and how they could be used to make live music even louder. By 1946, theatre system designs had inspired Leo to create his first guitar amplifiers, released in three varieties: the Princeton, the Deluxe (also called the Model 26) and the Professional. Leo didn't invent the guitar amplifier. They had been available years before. But he evolved the concept in the same way that Henry Ford had evolved transportation – things would never be the same again. If the amps of the 1930s were covered wagons, Leo's amps were the Model T Ford. Leo gave the guitar an engine; he made the guitar loud.

ELECTRIC AVENUE

It had to be that way. In a recent interview with guitar historian George Gruhn, he told me, "You're not going to have an amplifier invented by somebody who's a guitar maker. It's going to be invented by somebody who's an electronic technician. And the electronic technicians were working first for radio, which came before talking movies. Radio was electronics."

For the guitar to evolve, hundreds of small and seemingly unimportant inventions (many created by men and women who had never picked up a guitar in their lives) had to come together. It was a process that took decades but, to the public, seemed to happen overnight. Even though Leo Fender and the innovators that would follow him got this advancement off the ground, it was radio technology that gave them the tools to do it.

The guitar amps produced in the 1930s by companies such as Rickenbacker were metal-covered devices the size of a bread box and equipped with a tiny speaker. You could increase the volume so that

the guitar was louder than it had ever been before. But that isn't saying much – the bar for volume was freakin' *low* in the 1930s and 40s. The amp still couldn't amplify the sound to anything near the volume of 50s and 60s rock. The guitar had been electrified but it wasn't rock 'n' roll. Not until Leo Fender came along.

By the time 1949 came around, when Fender introduced the first versions of the solidbody Telecaster – the most important electric guitar ever created – to the world, Leo was already making loud, usable, rockin' amplifiers to plug them in to. Unlike the other brands on the market, when you played this new revolutionary Fender guitar, you had an equally powerful amplifier to plug it in to. This combination gave Fender the upper hand in forging a new pathway towards rock 'n' roll. Everyone afterwards was simply following in the footsteps of a radio technician from California. I know what you're thinking: the solidbody electric guitar amplifier came before the solidbody electric guitar? Yup!

CART BEFORE HORSE?

In many ways, the reason for this is actually pretty understandable: Leo recognised the demand for more volume and everything flowed from that.

He created an amp that could actually produce the raw power that his musician friends wanted and, when it became obvious that a standard acoustic guitar – even amplified – couldn't get the job done, he began developing solidbody guitars that could keep up.

What's important to understand here is that Leo didn't look into the world of guitar to fix the problems of the instrument. Instead, he looked to other arenas, where technology had already solved these same problems. Leo used the advancement of radio and theatre sound systems to evolve the amplification of the guitar; he borrowed proven tech to create something that'd never been seen.

Around the same time that the Telecaster became the guitar of choice for the modern musician, Leo also introduced to the world a fretted electric bass called the Precision. In time, players such as Carol Kaye would use the Precision to revolutionise the bassline in popular music and directly influence the way that song structure would evolve in the coming decades. But, again, Leo wasn't the first on the scene here. Audiovox had already produced a fretted electric bass and solidbody guitars by this time. Leo just understood that people wanted *volume*.

Guitars and basses had previously struggled to be heard above the powerful projections of brass and woodwind instruments. But plug a Fender electric instrument into a Fender electric amp and one performer could play louder than a symphony orchestra. This ease of use, however, had real-world consequences that Leo could never have anticipated. Remember our friends at the American Federation of Musicians getting upset that the talkies were putting thousands of movie theatre musicians out of work? They were about to get some company.

Imagine you're a 1950s club owner and you stage live dance music on the weekends. You've been bringing in Big Bands but they are bananas expensive – you have to pay a bus load of musicians (maybe 30 people altogether), as well as a conductor, a director and an entourage to handle all the arrangements. Now, all of a sudden, you're given an alternative: pay three or so snot-nosed twentysomethings whose newfangled electric instruments are capable of out-shouting those orchestras with ease. This was Charles Darwin's natural selection all over again, only with dollars instead of dinosaurs. Further invention would continue this evolution – at least, it would once they got past one small issue.

GREAT LEAP FORWARD

When Leo Fender's revolutionary Precision Bass arrived in 1951, there was one slight snag holding back its evolution. The bass amp as we know it did not exist yet. Leo's original trio of amps might have appeared in 1946 but the Bassman wouldn't arrive until 1952. And I know what you're thinking here:

'Hang on, Josh, are you trying to tell me that after everything you said about Leo's understanding of the need for loudness, the P-Bass existed for a whole year before they had anything to properly amplify it with? How the heck does that work?!'

What can I tell you – we live in an imperfect universe. Even generational geniuses are allowed a Mulligan or two. Anyway, in a bizarre reverse situation to the solidbody electric guitar, the bass came first and, necessity being the mother of invention, it barely took them a year to realise that these newly converted electric four-stringers might need something a bit more potent to work with than the existing amp offerings.

Like most of Leo's creations in that wildly inventive decade, the Bassman quickly saw several internal and cosmetic changes until reaching its perfect state with the 1959 model. But somehow nobody noticed and Fender soon abandoned the 4x10 combo format and the Bassman would switch to a separate head and speaker cabinet arrangement. But by that point, the Bassman's history had already taken another left turn.

BACK IN BLACK

On the other side of the Atlantic, the Bassman was going to propel the guitar amp evolution in a way that the Western Swing-loving Leo had never even imagined. Fender may have abandoned the 4x10 Bassman in 1960, but Jim Marshall couldn't get enough of them. The Englishman had been importing Fender amps into the UK and selling them out of his shop in West London, where they sold like hotcakes – or whatever the British equivalent is… crumpets? [Let's not get into this, Josh] – to the young guitar players in the capital's rapidly growing music scene.

This was, of course, a different time: pre-internet, pre-modern distribution, pre-eBay. What's more, the post-war trade bans made getting hold of US-made instruments in the UK extremely tricky in the 50s and, even as these restrictions relaxed in the 60s, sourcing gear from the US remained difficult and expensive.

Eventually, the high cost of import taxes, sea freight and the simple availability of these highly desired US amplifiers made Marshall think there had to be a better way. If he could get someone to build him an amp based on Fender's designs in the UK, he'd save himself a lot of hassle and improve his profit margin considerably.

Now, Jim was a savvy businessman. But he was no electronics whiz, so he turned to engineer Dudley Craven to build him an amplifier and, in the 1959 Fender Bassman, they had the perfect blueprint to work from. Craven and fellow electronic technician Ken Bran then retreated to Craven's garden shed/ham radio base and transformed the Fender Bassman circuit into the Marshall JTM45. Webster's defines evolution as "a process of change in a certain direction" and this moment in September 1963 was just that; Leo Fender's Southern California amplifier evolved onward in London, destined to fuel the music of Eric Clapton, Jimi Hendrix, Angus Young, Eddie Van Halen and countless other guitar gods.

WHAT'S NEXT?

It's been 62 years since my 1959 Bassman rolled off the production line in Fullerton, CA. I would love to travel back in time and watch what that was like: the sounds of the factory, the conversations of the day, Leo roaming around the shop floor solving problems. I can imagine my amp shipping out the door into an unknown world ahead of its time. What store sold it first? Who was the original owner? Were they famous? Have I heard my amp on a hit song and just don't know it? If my amp could talk, it would have six decades of stories to tell. What songs did it get to amplify? What moments was it part of? We may never know. But it's fun to imagine. I believe it's a gift to look into the past, because it can help us predict what's in the future.

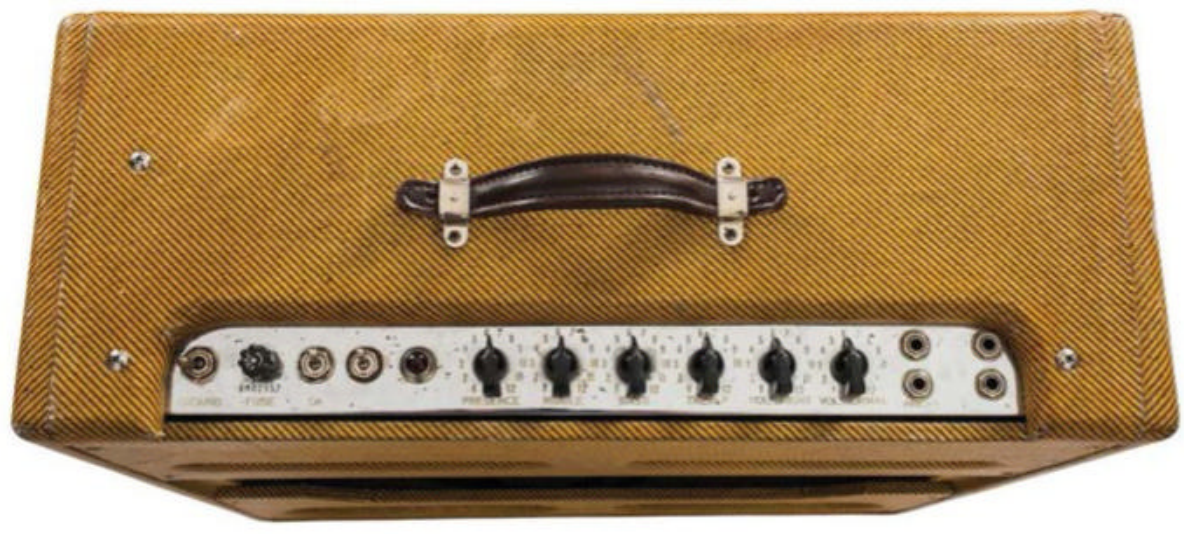
Electric guitar hasn't changed much since Leo's inventions. Sure, we have digital effects, modelling amps and $500,000 Klons, as well as some different-shaped guitars. But the heart of it all is still a magnet, strings and an amplifier that projects what we play.

When the first electric guitar was invented by Rickenbacker, they never saw Fender coming. When Fender made his first amps, he never saw Marshall coming and no-one at Ford Motor Company ever dreamt of the Tesla electric car. Invention is rarely predictable – and it is most definitely not simple.

Do me a favour. Just take a moment here. Close your eyes and try to imagine what's coming next. Is it in front of us now? Is it still evolving behind closed doors? What will the Tesla of guitar look like? Who is going to be the next great innovator? If history is a teacher, it would tell us that the chances are good that you've never even heard their name.

Hopefully that inventor is reading this right now. If you are, just remember that I believed in you first. I may want to interview you on *The JHS Show* in about 30 years. G

Join Josh for more effects adventures at thejhsshow.com



The Fender Bassman is more than just a brilliant amp in its own right – it would become the blueprint for some of the most iconic amps in rock

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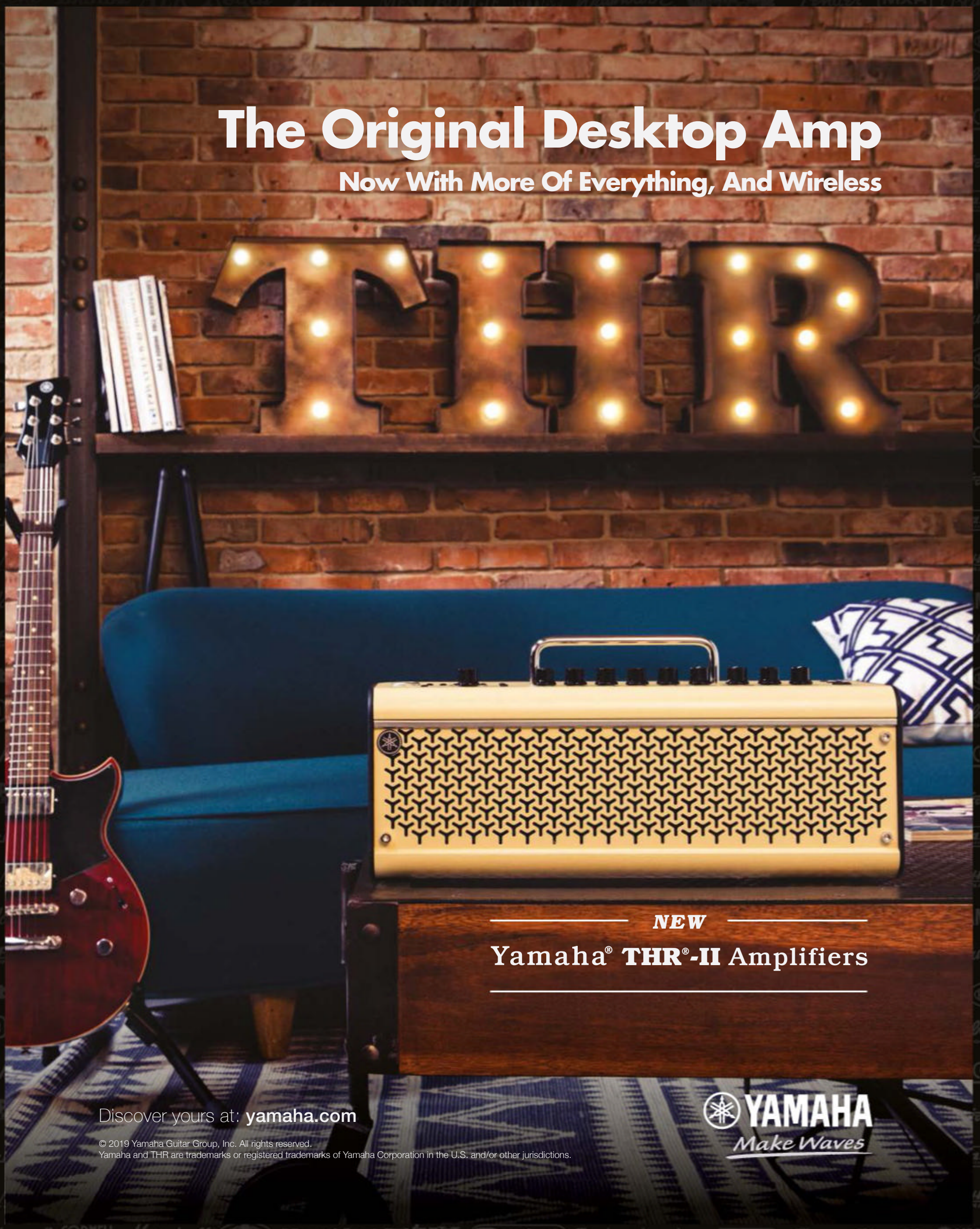

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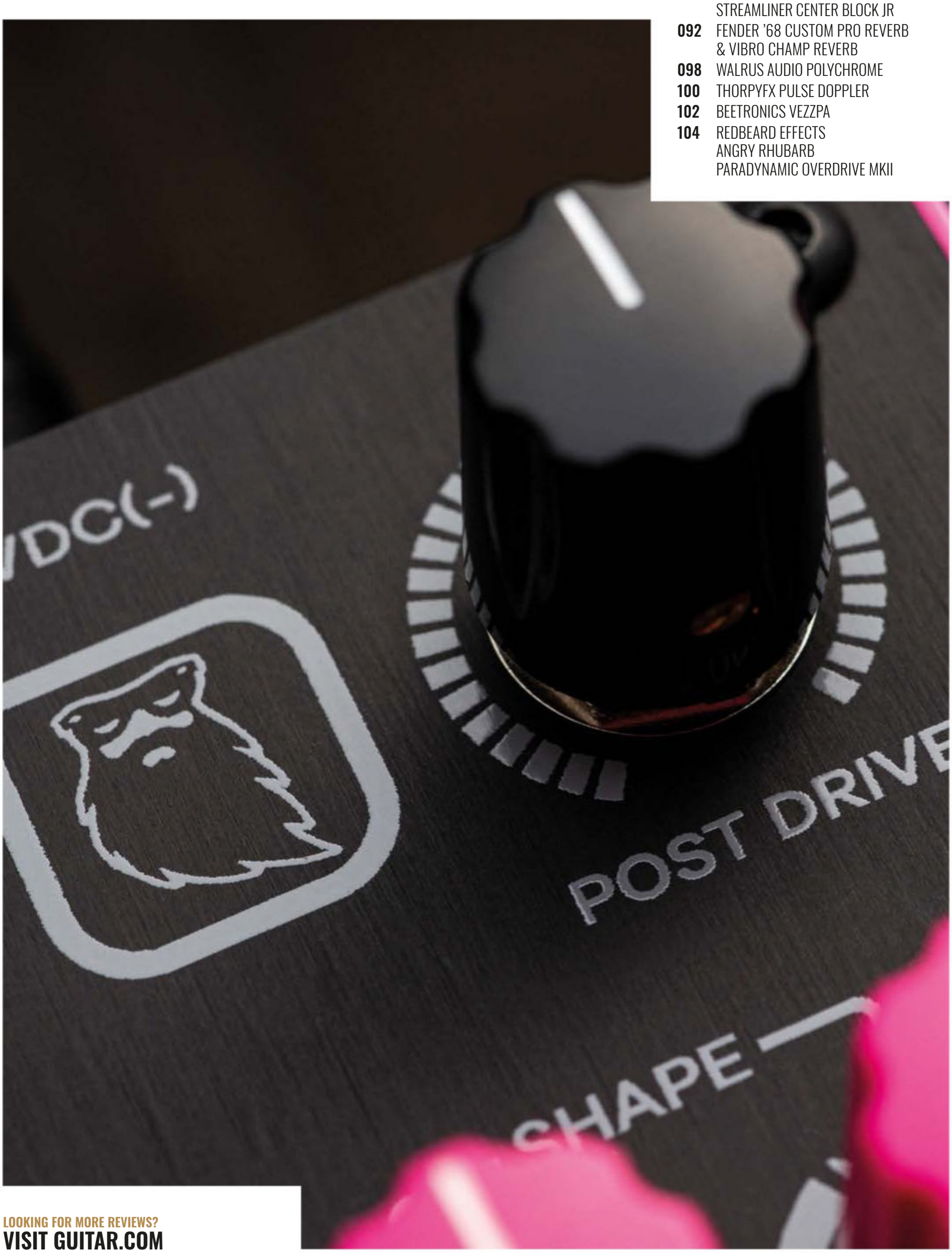

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NEURAL DSP
QUAD CORTEX

Guitar EDITOR'S CHOICE

WORDS CHRIS VINNICOMBE

Meet the groundbreaking digital modeller that could make your amplifier, your pedalboard and even your audio interface redundant. If the competition aren't scared, they should be

Almost 10 years ago, I sat in a recording studio with a couple of colleagues fairly convinced that we were the victims of an elaborate hoax. We had just unboxed the first Kemper Profiler to arrive in the UK and immediately used it to make a profile of a Marshall JTM45. When we AB'd our profile with the mic'd amplifier through studio monitors, the results were simply astounding. This had to be a hidden camera show or some sort of witchcraft, right? As we said in 2019 in *Guitar.com*'s round-up of the greatest gear of the decade, "Not only did the Kemper Profiler's release represent the moment that digital amp modelling truly came of age, it turned the process on its head and democratised it, allowing the end-user to create their own amp models."

A gamechanger it may have been at the time but, fast-forward to 2021 and the Kemper Profiler isn't quite the cutting-edge product it used to be. Though it now exists in several form factors, the user experience is somewhat old-school and eccentric. While it's true that Kemper's tech is still able to produce phenomenal-sounding results and remains at the heart of pro touring rigs all over the world, put simply, it's beginning to show its age – especially in comparison to the workflows of competitor products such as the Line 6 Helix and the Fractal Audio Axe-Fx III.

But what if a new modelling unit came along with the processing power to outgun Kemper, Helix and Axe-Fx? What if it featured higher-definition amp-modelling capabilities, boasted mod cons such as wifi connectivity, and sported a clean, intuitive touchscreen interface? What if all that tech could be packed into an elegant floor and desktop-friendly unit smaller than a 15-inch MacBook Pro? Enter Neural DSP and the Quad Cortex.

Hailing from Helsinki and headed up by Darkglass founder and chairman Douglas Castro, Neural DSP made its bones in the plugin world and the firm has collaborated with the likes of Cory Wong, Plini, Gojira and Tosin Abasi on virtual amplifier and effects modelling suites. The Quad Cortex marks Neural's first foray into dedicated guitar hardware and the spec sheet alone makes for exciting reading.

Claimed by Neural to be the most powerful floor modeller on the planet, the Quad Cortex boasts 2GHz of dedicated digital signal processing power provided

Get connected: from dual expression pedals to USB audio and MIDI, connectivity is extensive

Take turns: the volume knob is one of the Quad Cortex's few hardware controls

by four SHARC+ processors and ships with more than 50 guitar and bass amps, 70 effects and 1,000 impulse responses onboard. At the time of writing, the first few firmware updates (which, along with Cloud backups, can be carried out over wifi) have already provided additional cabinets, with more virtual devices on the way. Registering for a Neural account unlocks the Impulse Response Library, through which you can transfer third-party impulse responses to your Quad Cortex and manage the IRs associated with your account. There's also a fast-growing community of thousands of QC users with whom you can share presets and Captures via the Cortex Mobile app for iOS and Android.

Ah yes, Captures. The Kemper's unique selling point was, of course, its proprietary profiling technology. Neural's Capture process works on broadly similar principles, blasting a mildly terrifying sequence of white noise, synth-like bloops and alien mind-control noises through your amplifier, cabinet or overdrive pedal for a couple of minutes while it 'learns' and then replicates the sonic signature of your gear. The resulting Capture can then be saved, inserted anywhere into your virtual signal chain and, if you want to, shared with the wider world via the QC app.

Neural says its biomimetic AI tech is unlike any other, thanks to a "sophisticated neural network algorithm" that "perceives sound akin to human perception, making it the most natural-sounding capture solution on the planet". We'll address the veracity of those claims shortly but, first, let's check out the smart anodised aluminium unibody enclosure in which all this impressive technology is housed.

At just 290 x 190 x 50mm, the Quad Cortex has a smaller footprint than most pedalboards and is compact enough to fit inside the main pocket of a Mono M80 gigbag, ideal for travelling musicians.

KEY FEATURES

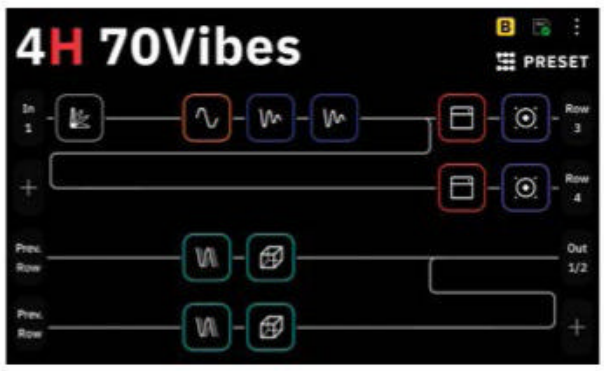
PRICE £1,599
DESCRIPTION Digital modelling floor unit with 2GHz SHARC+ architecture, touchscreen and wifi connectivity. Made in Finland
CONTROLS 7" display with multi-touch sensors, stainless-steel footswitches with stomp and rotary actuator functionality, volume knob
CONNECTIONS 2x TS, TSR and XLR dual combo inputs with variable impedance and level controls, built-in mic preamps and phantom power. 2x send, 2x return, 2x 1/4" out, 2x XLR out, MIDI-in, MIDI-out/thru, 2x expression pedal input, USB, 12V mains adapter
DIMENSIONS 290 x 190 x 50mm
WEIGHT 1.9kg/4.2lb
OPTIONS Quad Cortex GigCase (£109)
CONTACT neuraldsp.com

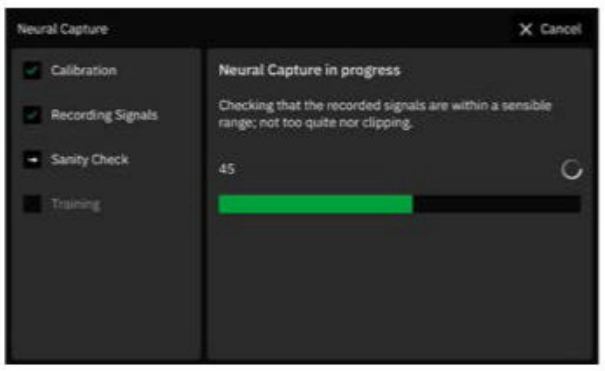
Weighing in at around 1.9kg, it's substantial enough not to skid around the stage when used as a standalone unit and, though we've seen forum rumblings about the spacing of the footswitches on the angled section of the enclosure, no significant problems were encountered during testing – even when piloted by a clumsy guitar journalist in size 11 boots.

Access to the lion's share of functionality comes courtesy of the Quad Cortex's seven-inch multi-touch display, with its proximity to those aforementioned boots hopefully mitigated by 1.8mm chemically strengthened protective glass manufactured by stateside specialists Corning. The 11 stainless-steel footswitches are proprietary units that combine stomp functionality with rotary actuators, allowing you to twist them to control onscreen parameters just as you would a regular potentiometer. Neural seems confident that these innovative footswitches are virtually unbreakable and the company even built a robot that has pressed the footswitches more than 100,000 times and counting without incident. Aside from the reassuringly plush-feeling volume control, as far as hardware controls go, that's about it.

Physical connectivity is comprehensive and kept out of harm's way around the back of the unit. Though some users of existing high-end modellers will lament the absence of S/PDIF (according to a forum post by Castro it was one of the compromises that had to be made to allow for such a small footprint), there's just about everything else you could possibly need here for integration into a modern live or studio setup – and it's all adjustable

In rotation: the Quad Cortex's clever footswitches act as rotaries too





Flexible friend: the combination inputs support multiple connection types and even phantom power

Stay tuned: the built-in tuner and tap tempo functions are accessible in every mode

and assignable at any time with just a downward swipe on the touchscreen.

Dual combo inputs support jack, TRS and XLR connections and come with built-in microphone preamps and phantom power supplies. It's a serious boon and, if you decide to use the Quad Cortex's ultra-low latency USB audio capabilities, the QC may be all the audio interface that you need.

In addition to that, there are dual effects loops (these double up as additional inputs/outputs, allowing you to connect four instruments or have more complex output routing), two jack and two XLR outputs, a headphone output, a dedicated output for use during the Capture process, MIDI in and out/thru, and inputs for two expression pedals.

The supplied 12-volt PSU is admittedly a little flimsy and an IEC socket would probably have been a more robust option. But again, it's likely that this would have compromised the footprint of the device. Time to plug in.

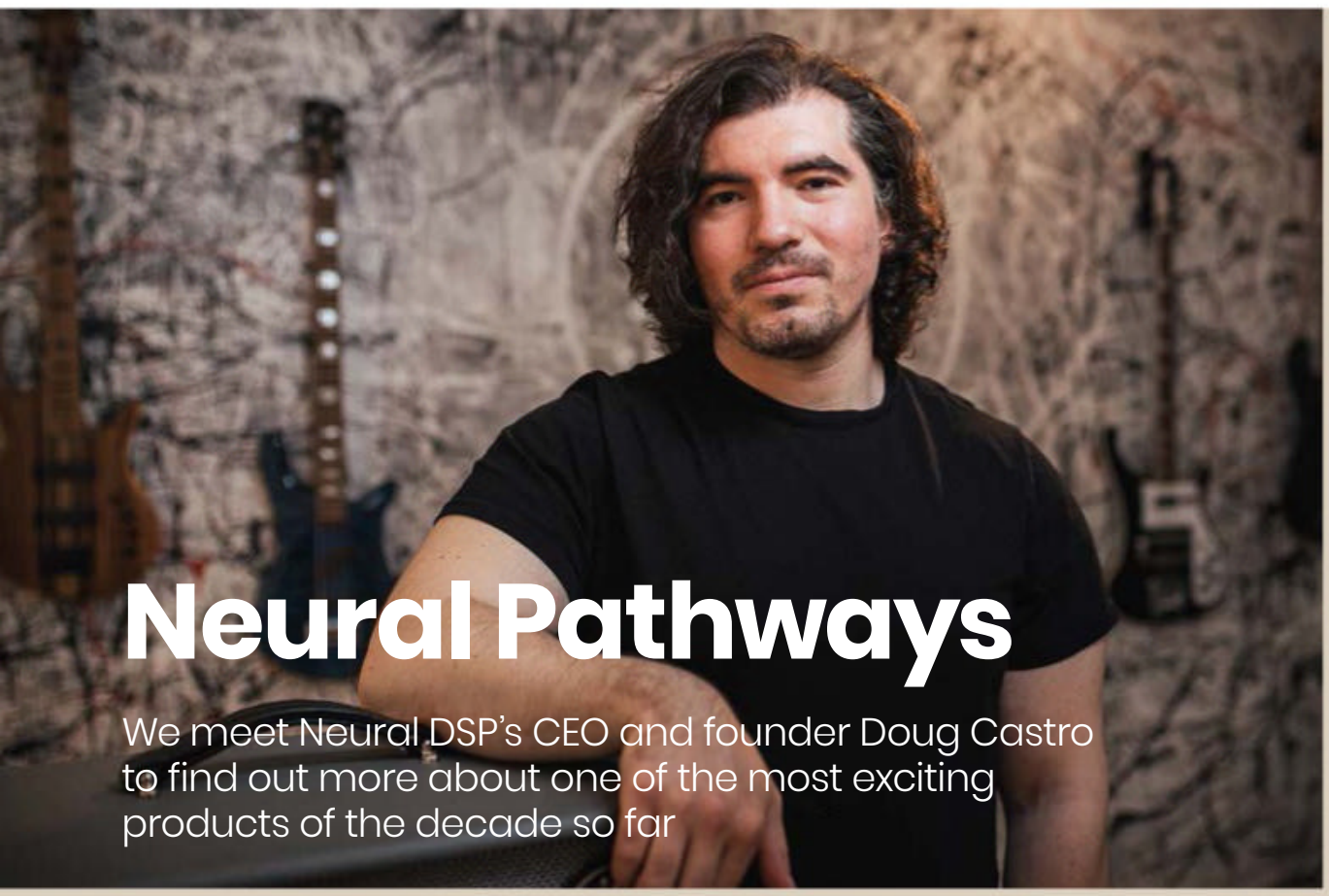
IN USE

In terms of signal chains, routing and connectivity, the Quad Cortex is capable of being as simple or as complex as you want it to be. And yet, whether you are connecting to wifi, dragging and dropping effects in a signal chain, auditioning virtual microphone models or creating your own Captures, the user experience remains logical and easy to get to grips with. Though the touchscreen isn't exactly iPhone responsive, it's still impressive and navigating the onboard software soon becomes second nature.

For performance purposes, you have a choice of configuring the QC footswitches in one of three modes. In Stomp mode, you can assign any element (block) of the signal chain in your virtual rig to its own switch, so it's much like using the Neural unit as you would a traditional pedalboard. In Scene mode, each footswitch controls the settings of any number of blocks within a rig, giving you eight snapshots of one preset, while Preset mode offers instant access to banks of eight virtual rigs via switches A-H. Stomp is the easiest mode in which to get your bearings and, once you've added a block to the signal path, tapping on the icon opens a window in which its parameters can be adjusted via either the touchscreen or the corresponding illuminated footswitch. Hit the disk icon in the top-right corner to save your progress to the existing location, or expand the adjacent drop-down menu to save it in one of 2,560 user preset slots. That should be enough for most people.

For all the appeal of this headache-free interface, perhaps the most thrilling thing about the Quad Cortex might be its sonic performance. All of the leading modellers are capable of professional-quality guitar tones that are good enough to headline major festivals with or play on hit records. However, after a year in lockdown spent using both the Kemper and the Universal Audio Ox for direct recording, the virtual amplifiers that the Quad Cortex ships with and our DIY Captures immediately feel more organic under the fingers, less fatiguing on the ears and simply more HD overall.

From an audio-engineering standpoint, when compared to Kemper profiles of the same amplifier with an otherwise identical signal chain, Quad Cortex Captures are more lifelike and information-rich, blending seamlessly and beautifully with third-party plugins and responding to EQ more like an analogue audio source. Trusted engineer and guitarist friends who have spent time with the Quad Cortex agree, with the general consensus being that Neural has raised the bar sonically and created a platform with a more appealing UX than its competitors.



Neural Pathways

We meet Neural DSP's CEO and founder Doug Castro to find out more about one of the most exciting products of the decade so far

When did you first decide to go ahead with the Quad Cortex project?
"The idea and basic concept came to me in about 2015. Like most things, it started as a curiosity and then the idea started growing and evolving in my mind. After a few months, I went from mulling over it to being completely obsessed with both the prospect of daring so greatly and what an amazing challenge and test it would be. It was quite literally the product of my dreams and I knew until I had it in my hands I could simply not stop thinking about it... pretty much every waking second.

"Like all good things, it took years before we broke ground on the project. I started working on specifications in about 2017, and Neural Capture has been under development since early 2018. It is quite an intense thing to have your mind completely devoted to a single thought for years. It can be really excruciating. But having gone through similar processes, to an extent, with Darkglass, I also knew that this obsession, although unpleasant, was a good sign."

Were there any major stumbling blocks or light-bulb moments when it all started to come together?
"I don't think I can go over the whole list without this interview becoming a short book! There were many crises and often daily issues that were potentially fatal to the project. Most of the good moments are lumped in with challenges, so sometimes it is quite hard to parse both. You can feel great relief or pride while simultaneously being incredibly frustrated or worried. As [American entrepreneur] Marc Andressen once said about start-ups, 'You only ever experience two emotions: euphoria and terror. And I find that lack of sleep enhances them both.'

"There were a few pure and sublime moments: trying Neural Capture for the first time was, along with the birth of my daughter, one of the happiest moments of my life. I cried when I saw the first UI on a screen for the first time as well."

With such well-established competitors with large user bases already present on the market, how important was it to address perceived shortcomings of existing tech?
"When it comes to products, we are methodical about competing devices: both what they do extremely well and in what areas they could be improved. You rarely have enough time and resources to do everything perfectly at once, so it's always a moving target and a constant triage of what will add the most value to the users or eliminate the greatest pain. I am sure this is the same for everyone executing on products as complex as cutting-edge modeller devices. But after studying the landscape, we felt that we could contribute to an already mature space, that the device of *our* dreams could resonate with a significant portion of the potential users."

When it comes to the Capture process, can you explain in layman's terms what's happening, what's being measured and what makes Quad Cortex different?
"Explaining how Capture or our autonomous modelling approaches work to experts in the field is already challenging, so doing so in layman's terms is going to skip over a lot of the process! However: a tube amplifier consists of a series of gain stages with complex, varying dynamics (each tube's clipping curves) and frequency response caused by the passive components needed to configure each stage.

That said, the Quad Cortex is not perfect yet; all the major food groups are accounted for and their quality is very good but the onboard effects selection initially feels rather thin. Also, the amp menu is biased towards higher-gain tones but that's perhaps to be expected given the nature of Neural's existing plugin user base, not to mention that guitarists in heavier genres tend to be early adopters of digital modelling tech. The good news is that new amps and effects are being added on an ongoing basis and even players whose amplifier tastes are rooted firmly at the vintage end of the spectrum will find much to love about Neural's addictively touch-sensitive and harmonically rich AC30 and Deluxe Reverb models.

Indeed, the combination of convenience, the sheer quality of the tones and the fact that you can add Captures of your own personal amps and drive pedals to the signal chain makes the idea of gigging direct with the Quad Cortex a very attractive one indeed. It's already proven to be invaluable in the studio and, once live venues with decent PA systems reopen their doors, taking the Quad Cortex on the road will be a no-brainer. G

10/10 **A leap forward in terms of both usability and sonics, the Quad Cortex is the shape of modelling tech to come**

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Additionally capacitive elements store energy, which causes a time-dependant response that is unique to each amplifier and its reactive load (speaker), in addition to factors such as crossover distortion that may occur depending on how the power tubes are biased, as well as non-linearities caused by the output transformer's hysteresis and iron core-saturation.

"The key to Neural Capture is that by measuring how each amp processes the probe signals, it is able to analyse the interaction of all of these factors into a single processor, learning, from the ground up, the overall frequency response of the system, as well as the super-intricate saturation characteristics and even the time-dependant response."

Although modelling technology has traditionally attracted early adopters from the heavier end of the music spectrum, the QC has plenty to offer more vintage-style players, with the onboard AC30 and Deluxe Reverb tones being especially impressive. Can you tell us about how these were modelled?
"Currently we use a hybrid method, employing more conventional white box modelling approaches – modelling the behaviour based on an analysis of the amplifier schematic – and our proprietary automated techniques. These are the technologies that power our plugins too.

"When a system is on the linear operating region (clean), recreating its behaviour is mainly a matter of recreating the frequency response of the system, which is straightforward. Highly non-linear systems (high-gain amps) are more complex because they generate significantly more harmonics, which make it easier for people to discern if the model is not perceivably accurate.

"Edge-of-break-up circuits are probably the toughest: they will generate higher harmonic content, which will give away flaws in the models, because by definition you make use of the entire dynamic range, it's easy for people to notice whether the model's clipping transfer function is a quick approximation or not."

The community aspect opens the door for artists to change the way they release music and interact with their audience, for example offering QC-owning fans the chance to download actual presets their heroes use live and on studio recordings. Was this something you considered when building the app functionality?
"Certainly. Creating the tools that would allow for a community to form around the Cortex ecosystem was one of the key things we thought we could do differently. It's already something that people enjoy. There are thousands of Captures and presets on Cortex Cloud already and there'll be tens of thousands by the end of the year. And this should grow exponentially as we ship more units and continue to improve the Cloud experience and its integration with the device.

"The vision of building a community transcends making the product more valuable to users; there's also something beautiful about helping people connect over the ones and sounds they love. Messageboards do this to a certain extent but, with Cortex, you can instantly share sounds and, as we expand the gesture set, co-operate with others in a very seamless and inspiring way. This also applies greatly for high-profile users, whose fans can follow their other social accounts for updates and their Cortex Cloud profiles to get their tone. Given how much of the emotional connection between a fan and the artists they admire is in the tone, this could truly become a special connective link between them."

At the moment users can share presets and Captures via the app but there doesn't seem to be a way to offer Captures for sale in the way third parties can with Kemper profiles. Do you see a time when Capture stores will exist, perhaps within the walled garden environment of the app?
"Yes, currently we are working on a ton of quality-of-life improvements around sharing presets and Captures, so that's the main priority. But building up this infrastructure is something that we will leverage seamlessly into an amazing marketplace as well. I believe there is great value in professional musicians and audio engineers creating content for the community. It's one of those things that we would've liked to do at the start but there were many other things we had to prioritise."

It seems like there are plenty of exciting firmware updates in the pipeline already. Can you give us any hints about future developments users might not know about yet?
"Right now the priority is very simple: improve the product, which means enriching the feature set, expanding the algorithm library and fixing bugs. We are working on effects and amplifiers in parallel and we are looking forward to cranking the gas on adding algorithms more aggressively now that a lot of the infrastructural work has been done in these past three months."

Visit neuraldsp.com for more

GIBSON CUSTOM

60TH ANNIVERSARY 1961 LES PAUL SG STANDARD & CUSTOM

WORDS HUW PRICE

Gibson has sold more SGs than any other electric guitar in the company's illustrious history. Here, we run the rule over a pair of new anniversary models that wind the clock back six decades to where it all began

The first adverts for Gibson's newly redesigned Les Paul signature models described them as a "solid hit". That might have seemed presumptuous at the time but you can't argue with the sales figures. Plus, unlike some other iconic Gibson designs, the SG, as it would become known, has never been out of production.

Other than repro ads among the case candy, and engraved and painted logos on the control cavity covers that read 'A Solid Hit For 60 Years', the anniversary branding has been kept to a minimum. But you'll have to move fast if you want one – these guitars will only be available during the anniversary year.

1961 LES PAUL SG STANDARD

The first features that strike us are the mahogany body's fabulous grain pattern and the shade of its deep Cherry finish. Gibson is once again using fretboard binding with a vintage-correct colour and thickness, and the aged celluloid nitrate inlays look especially good. Though Brazilian rosewood is long off the menu, this Indian rosewood board is suitably dark and there are no traces of sanding lines.

The vintage-style frets appear to have been installed flawlessly and the fret nibs are uniformly perfect. For a factory manufactured guitar, this is impressive stuff, and we're pleased to see a nylon

SOLID
the Les Paul guitar
by GIBSON
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Standard bearer: the Standard's alnico III Custombuckers sport lightly aged covers

Deluxe treatment: the nickel-plated Kluson Deluxe tuners feature double-ring buttons

Rose garden: the Indian rosewood 'board boasts aged celluloid nitrate inlays

nut and a headstock that tapers in thickness by almost 1.5mm. This is a vintage reissue, so the details matter.

In that spirit, the Kluson Deluxe tuners have double-ring buttons and, like the pickup covers, they're lightly aged. The tiny dimples around the cover screw holes are another nice touch and the shape is pretty close to vintage PAF specs.

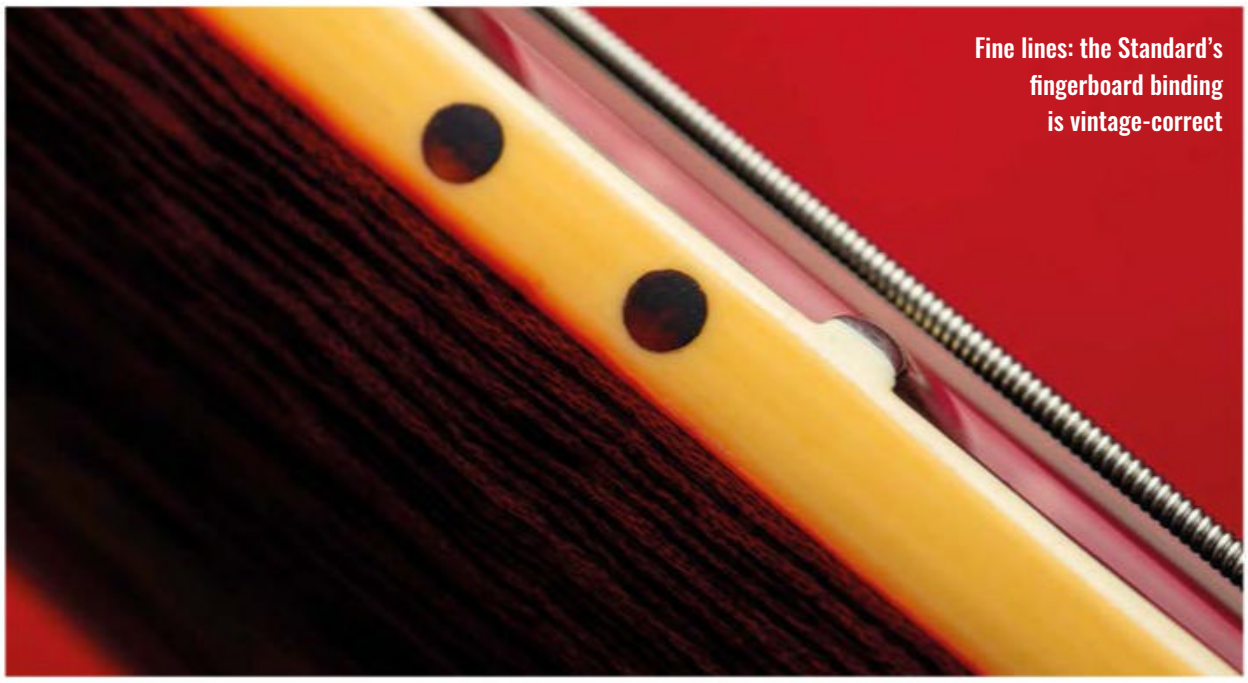
A wireless nickel-plated ABR-1 bridge has been teamed with Gibson's Sideways Vibrola complete with foldaway arm. In its stashed position, there's not much room left for the controls and access to the neck pickup's tone pot is compromised. But that's the way it always was, so that's the way it is here.

We like the plastics too. The 'Les Paul' truss-rod cover has a vintage-correct ledge and the four-ply pickguard's bevel is spot-on. Other period details include the way the Cherry finish bleeds into the neck binding edge – at present it looks suitably vintage, but we hope it stops where it is.

1961 LES PAUL SG CUSTOM

The Custom represents the 'more is more' school of guitar design: more binding, more pearl and, more significantly, one more pickup. There are three Custombuckers rather than two, and of course the metalwork is gold-plated. Thankfully though, subtle relic'ing keeps things just on the right side of bling.

When the first SG Customs were made, the paintwork and plastics were perhaps meant to match more closely. However, the contrast between the three-ply pickguard and



Fine lines: the Standard's fingerboard binding is vintage-correct

HAPPY ANNIVERSARY

Though it was launched with Les Paul's name on its headstock, the model that would become known simply as the SG was a forward-facing original design that has remained relevant for 60 years

With sales of original Les Pauls waning, Gibson was no doubt feeling the pressure to keep up with Fender and the SG seems like an attempt to meet the challenge of the Stratocaster head on. New features included a thin and lightweight double-cutaway mahogany body with extensive and radical comfort contouring. Upper-fret access had never been easier, with an astonishing (some would say foolhardy) 21st fret body join and a barely perceptible heel.

In Custom guise, the SG even had three pickups, and Gibson made a valiant attempt to devise a vibrato system. The Sideways Vibrola was bulky, heavy, awkward to use and reluctant to return strings to pitch. Many vintage examples ended up being avoided or replaced with stop tailpieces or Bigsbys.

Credit for the SG body shape is mostly given to Gibson engineer Larry Allers, who is remembered as a gifted woodworker. He took his cues from notes provided by the sales team, who gave Gibson detailed customer and dealer feedback.

At the 1961 NAMM show, the new design was a resounding success and Gibson took plenty of orders. It certainly helped that SGs soon became the guitar of choice for players as diverse as Eric Clapton, George Harrison, Sister Rosetta Thorpe, Pete Townshend, Frank Zappa and Carlos Santana.

Later, the likes of Angus Young, Johnny Marr, Derek Trucks and Gary Clark Jr would prove that this chameleonic instrument is at home in almost any genre.

Ironically, Les Paul himself wasn't a big fan. He cited bendy necks causing unwanted vibrato and a lack of sustain as issues, along with the fact that he kept hitting his hands against the body horns. It has also been suggested that Gibson royalties were complicating his already rather messy divorce from Mary Ford, so Les came to an agreement with his friend Ted McCarthy. Either way, from 1963 Les Paul's name was no longer associated with the SG.

Besides the Standard and Custom models here, Gibson also offered a stripped-down SG Junior with a single P-90 and a wraptail bridge, and an SG Special with two P-90s, a wrapover and a simplified vibrato that worked better than the Sideways Vibrola. Since the 1960s, various versions have come and gone, including the SG Pro, Deluxe, Artist, Menace and Gothic. The less said about the Robot SG, the better.

Unlike the Les Paul, Flying V, Explorer and Firebird, the SG has never been out of production and, besides altered neck joints and various pickguard changes, it has never undergone a serious redesign. Although the SG still divides opinion, it's an undeniable classic.

the creamy Polaris White finish has become an iconic look. Here, the Les Paul branding appears on the plastic plate that bridges the gap between the fretboard and the neck pickup and conceals the neck tenon.

As befits a Custom, the fretboard is ebony with pearl block markers and there's a split-diamond headstock inlay. The controls are less complicated than you might think. The three-way toggle switch selects the neck pickup, the middle and bridge, and the bridge alone. When the switch is set in the centre position, the bridge pickup's volume and tone controls act on the middle pickup too.

A peek under the covers – which can be swapped for the plain covers provided in the cases if preferred – reveals Gibson-branded CTS potentiometers with replica Black Beauty tone capacitors and yellow plastic insulated wires. Everything has been hand-wired to a high standard and looks suitably vintage-correct, albeit with the tone controls connected 1950s-style.

IN USE

The Custom is heavier and has a slightly chunkier, more rounded neck. In contrast, the Standard has a wide and slim D profile that feels pretty much spot-on for a '61 Gibson. Both are superb; we have no clear favourite.

There's quite a contrast in unplugged tones too, with both exhibiting impressive resonance but in somewhat different ways. The Standard boasts more woodiness and warmth, with the liveliest transient attack. The Custom is louder, brighter and clearer, with slightly compressed transients and noticeably longer sustain.

Unfortunately, all our attempts to use the Sideways Vibrolas are accompanied by unwelcome mechanical noises, and they are very difficult to keep in tune. But at least the vibrato performs a useful function on the Custom. Thanks in part to its Grover tuners, without the Vibrola, this guitar would be inconveniently neck heavy. The added bulk at the body end, however, results in near-perfect strapped-on balance.

Heavy hand: the Sideways Vibrola is something of a primitive design

Old gold: the Custom's aged Grover tuners are smooth and accurate

Through a 20-watt Marshall head, the tonal differences are even more apparent. Without stompbox assistance, the Standard struggles for sustain and never quite achieves the singing bloom of the Custom. We like the Standard's woodiness and it excels for rhythm and slide duties but it doesn't really cut through mixes that well and we can't quite channel our inner Angus.

The Custom has no such difficulties, always coming through cleanly and clearly irrespective of pickup settings. There's a far broader range of tones here too, with a wiry nasality on the bridge and a sweetly vocal bite on the neck. The middle setting adds depth and complexity to the bridge pickup, along with a hint of midrange scoop. It's not a million miles away from the sound of a neck-and-bridge setting with the bridge

Back in black: both guitars boast dual Black Beauty tone capacitors

pickup knocked back a touch on the volume control, and it offers a slightly different but likeable tone.

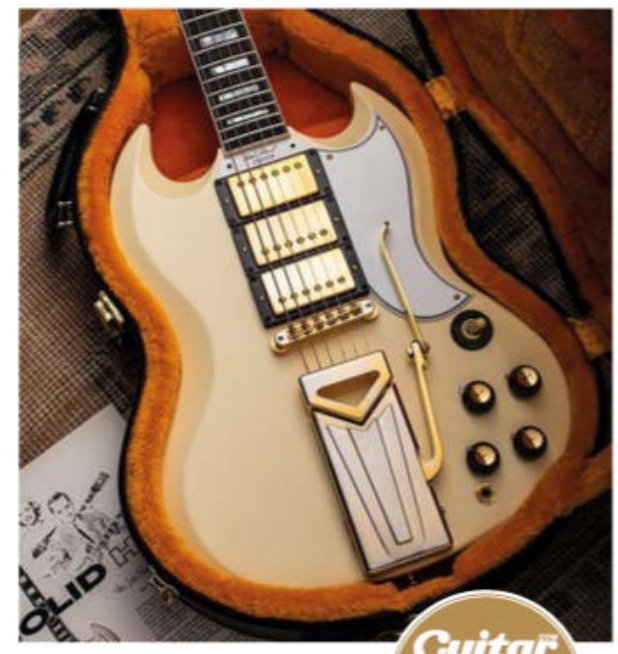
Admittedly, there's always some degree of variation between apparently identical guitars. Were we given another two review samples, we wouldn't be surprised if the tables were turned. But overall, the Custom wins out here due to its precise attack, its definition, its extra aggression and its easy sustain. Since the Custombucker pickups are unpotted, any contact will likely be heard through an amp, so if you're one of those players whose pick collides with middle-position pickups, be aware that you'll have to adapt your technique accordingly.

Other than the rather archaic vibrato design, both of these guitars are difficult to fault for build quality and playability, and it's clear that Gibson has recently made tremendous strides forward in those areas. It's pleasing to see Gibson making such great guitars again and these SGs are a fitting tribute to a classic electric guitar design with timeless appeal.

KEY FEATURES

60TH ANNIVERSARY 1961
LES PAUL SG STANDARD
PRICE £4,399 (inc Lifton reissue 5-latch case)
DESCRIPTION Solidbody electric guitar, made in the USA
BUILD One-piece mahogany body, set mahogany neck, bound Indian rosewood fretboard with 12" radius, celluloid nitrate inlays, 22 vintage-style frets, nylon nut
HARDWARE ABR-1 bridge, Sideways Vibrola, Kluson double-ring reissue tuners
ELECTRONICS 2x alnico III Custombuckers, 2x volume and 2x tone controls, 3-way toggle pickup selector, CTS potentiometers, Black Beauty tone capacitors
SCALE LENGTH 24.57"/624mm
NECK WIDTH 42.5mm at nut, 52.7mm at 12th fret
NECK DEPTH 20.2mm at first fret, 22.6mm at 12th fret
STRING SPACING 36.4mm at nut, 51.9mm at bridge
WEIGHT 3.2kg/7.0lb
LEFT HANDERS No
FINISH Cherry Red nitrocellulose lacquer
CONTACT gibson.com

8/10 **A little lacking in sustain but in all other respects one of the finest SG Standard reissues we've played**



Guitar EDITOR'S CHOICE

KEY FEATURES

60TH ANNIVERSARY 1961
LES PAUL SG CUSTOM
PRICE £5,899 (inc Lifton reissue 5-latch case)
DESCRIPTION Solidbody electric guitar, made in the USA
BUILD One-piece mahogany body, set mahogany neck, bound ebony fretboard with 12" radius, mother-of-pearl inlays, bound headstock with split-diamond inlay, 22 vintage-style frets, nylon nut
HARDWARE ABR-1 bridge, Sideways Vibrola, Grover tuners
ELECTRONICS 3x alnico III Custombuckers, 2x volume and 2x tone controls, 3-way toggle pickup selector, CTS potentiometers, Black Beauty tone capacitors
SCALE LENGTH 24.57"/624mm
NECK WIDTH 42.6mm at nut, 52mm at 12th fret
NECK DEPTH 20.8mm at first fret, 23.1mm at 12th fret
STRING SPACING 36.19mm at nut, 52mm at bridge
WEIGHT 3.6kg/7.9lb
LEFT-HANDERS No
FINISH Polaris White nitrocellulose lacquer

9/10 **Excellent tonal range, superb build quality and sound – but treat the Sideways Vibrola with caution**

LIKE THESE? TRY THESE... Maybach Albatroz '65-2 **£1,649** • Fano ML6 **£2,999** • Knaggs Honga **£3,199**

PRO REVERB™
-AMP
Fender

Well adjusted: the Noventa features an Adjusto-Matic bridge and Jazzmaster vibrato

Sounding board: the Surf Green and Fiesta Red models have maple fretboards

FENDER
NOVENTA JAZZMASTER

WORDS RICHARD PURVIS

Heading up Fender's quirky new Noventa range, this three-pickup offset is all about blurring boundaries. But does it have the tones to back up its rebel attitude?

Noventa might sound like the name of a forgotten Vauxhall people-carrier but there's nothing middle-of-the-road about this latest Fender range. Should you need proof of that, just count the pickups.

The Noventa Telecaster only has one, so it's really more of an Esquire, while the Stratocaster and Jazzmaster have two and three, respectively, suggesting some sort of curious role-reversal… except that the pickups themselves look a lot like P-90s, which aren't very Fender at all. Clearly, then, these are not guitars for your typical Fender traditionalists.

This instrument, the flagship of the Mexican-made series, is a Jazzmaster in pretty much name only: while it has the offset body shape and the familiar floating tailpiece, the bridge is a fixed tune-o-matic type and the only switch here is a five-way blade for accessing all of those Strat-like in-between sounds.

We're curious to find out just how Strat-like that will be. Fender isn't saying much about the construction of these Noventa pickups, which are common to all three models. But it's surely no coincidence that they look a great deal like Gibson's single-coil soapbar design. A recipe for chunkier tones?

The black covers certainly make for a striking contrast with the mint pickguard of our Surf Green sample. This model is also available in Fiesta Red, as well as a natural Walnut finish complete with black 'guard and pau ferro fretboard that will make time-travellers from 1974 feel right at home.

IN USE

The first thing we notice when picking up this guitar is that we'd like to put it down again – just under 4kg is maybe only a little above average for one of Fender's big-bodied offsets but it's heavy if you're used to Strats or Teles. At least the C-shaped neck is comfy, remaining resolutely 'medium' all the way up to the body join (which, incidentally, looks a little gappy on the bass side of our guitar).

When we plug in, we're greeted by a constant buzz that only stops when we touch the end of the lead, not the bridge or strings. That clearly indicates a grounding issue, which is unlikely to take much fixing but is hardly a reassuring start.

Clean sweep: three Noventa single-coil pickups offer plenty of variety

KEY FEATURES

PRICE £889 (inc gigbag)
DESCRIPTION Offset-waist solidbody electric guitar, made in Mexico
BUILD Alder body, bolt-on maple neck, 9.5" radius maple fingerboard, 21 medium jumbo frets, synthetic bone nut
HARDWARE Vintage-style tuners, Adjusto-Matic bridge and vintage-style floating tailpiece
ELECTRICS 3x Noventa single-coil pickups, master volume and tone, five-way switch
SCALE LENGTH 25.5"/648mm
NECK WIDTH 42mm at nut, 51.2mm at 12th fret
NECK DEPTH 21.4mm at first fret, 22.5mm at 12th fret
STRING SPACING 35.5mm at nut, 51.5mm at bridge
WEIGHT 3.9kg/8.6lb
LEFT-HANDERS No
FINISH Surf Green (as reviewed), Fiesta Red, Walnut
CONTACT fender.com

Heads up: the neck has a satin urethane finish while the headstock face is gloss polyester

Nevertheless, we plough on, making our way through the five pickup settings without encountering any surprises – but that's not a complaint. Fender has aimed for a genre-hopping crossover zone here and hit the mark with a practical blend of classic tonal ingredients.

If you like Stratocasters, rest assured that you'll find plenty of that famous clucky clarity here. And if you like P-90s, prepare to savour the throaty thickness that these pickups add to the formula. Clean, crunchy or properly scuzzed up, the pickups provide a decent 'best of both worlds' solution that still allows for something close to the full suite of pure Strat tones simply by dialling the volume back to about seven or eight. There's a satisfying flexibility here.

And if you like Jazzmasters? There's not a massive amount of that famous midrange sweetness to be found in this guitar, and you don't have the option of combining bridge and neck pickups for ultimate chime in the middle position. Dare we say it, you're probably better off with the Strat model. However, if you appreciate offset stylings but have never got on with the tones or complex switching typical of vintage-style models, then the Noventa Jazzmaster is well worthy of investigation. G

8/10 **An interesting mash-up, this is Jazzmaster in name but not nature**

LIKE THIS? TRY THESE...

Fret-King Black Label Esprit III **£729**
Reverend Ron Asheton Jetstream 390 **£879**
Fender Noventa Stratocaster **£799**

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GRETSCH

G2622T-P90 STREAMLINER CENTER BLOCK & G2655T-P90 STREAMLINER CENTER BLOCK JR

WORDS RICHARD PURVIS

New to the tradition-busting Streamliner series, meet a pair of semi-hollow models with unfamiliar pickups out to redefine the limits of what a Gretsch guitar can do

When is a Gretsch not a Gretsch? If your answer is "when it isn't fully hollow and doesn't have extra-twangy pickups", the brand's new Streamliner Center Block models want to change your mind. It represents the latest move in Gretsch's quest to cover a broader sonic palette – and it's quite a bold one.

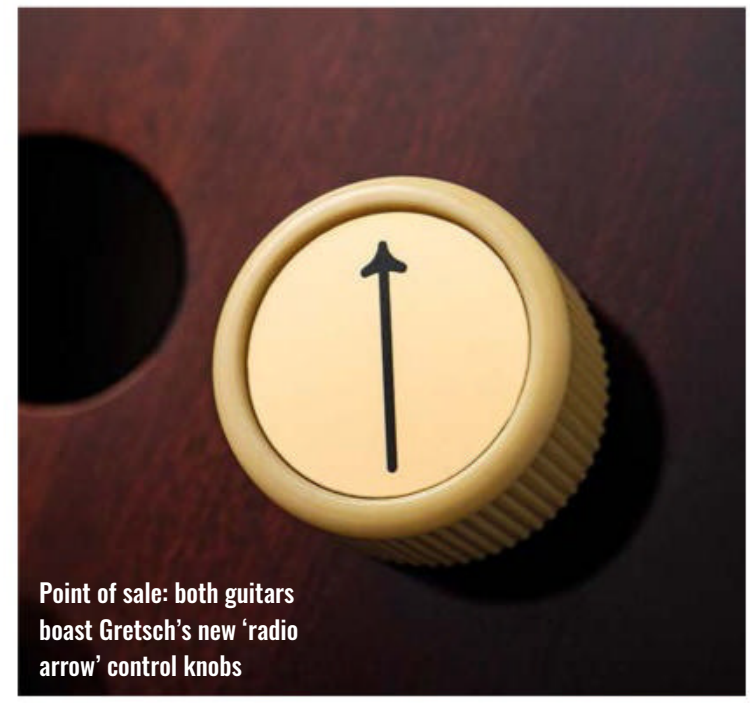
You have probably guessed by now from the words 'Center Block' that these are semi-acoustic guitars. You might also have noticed from the photographs that they are packing what appear to be P-90-style pickups with staple polepieces. But as we shall soon discover, that doesn't quite tell the whole story.

The basics are simple enough. Both are double-cutaway semis with Bigsby vibratos (cheaper hardtail versions are available too) and the traditional Gretsch control layout: individual pickup volume knobs, plus master volume and tone – each with its own cute arrow marker – and a three-way switch up top. The bodies are bound in off-white with neat purfling, the necks have little oval fret markers and, if you ask us, there's not a lot wrong with the large-bodied G2622T-P90 in terms of looks.

The two-tone Junior, however, may prove more divisive, as its rather drastically shrunken-down body makes its hardware look disproportionately big, especially the thick plastic surrounds to the FideliSonic 90 pickups. Speaking of pickups…

Of course, there's nothing particularly revolutionary about Gretsch guitars packing P-90s – Eddie Cochran fitted one in the neck position of his 6120 more than 60 years ago. But this time, they're in both berths and, besides, these are no ordinary P-90s. The look of these all-new units is clearly inspired by Gibson's staple pickups, which are generally known as a brighter-toned option. But there's no reason to assume they'll sound that way here.

With good neck joins and tidy binding, our review guitars are well made overall. The G2622T earns a small black mark for a misaligned arrow on one of the volume knobs, while the G2655T gets one for slightly scruffy finishing around the lower f-hole, and another for a painfully sharp-cornered nut.



Point of sale: both guitars boast Gretsch's new 'radio arrow' control knobs

IN USE

These instruments are identical in every specification except body shape and Bigsby type. It's no surprise, then, that their acoustic voices are broadly similar, at least in the top end, the main difference being that the bigger guitar has much more bloom in the lower frequencies. The other immediately obvious difference is that, while the full-size model is reasonably well balanced on the strap, the sawn-off Junior is much more neck-heavy.

First up for amplification is the large-bodied G2622T and, as much as we love wanging away on a Bigsby, the B70 fitted to this guitar feels ever so slightly anomalous. Why? This guitar's fundamental voice is so thick and buttery that it feels more like a jazzbox than a rockabilly twanger – and we don't just mean on the neck pickup.

There's a beautifully quacky quality to the upper mids – these are P-90s alright, with all of that distinctive cheeky-but-firm attack, the sonic equivalent of being slapped with a cardboard fish. But even with the switch to the back, this is a darkly woody tone. Does this still count as 'twang'? Possibly. But it's not our usual flavour. This is probably down mostly to the FideliSonic 90 design but perhaps also to the fact that the bridge pickup has been placed a good inch or so away from the saddles, well out of the zingy zone.

The combination of solidity and snap is addictive in its own way – it's smooth and fluffy rather than muffled, with plenty of responsiveness to changes in picking strength. The three pickup settings offer three variants on the same theme, with added cluck in the middle position and more than ample warmth at the front.

Metal machines: both instruments sport die-cast Gretsch tuners

At your convenience: the Junior's compact proporations mean it comes equipped with a B50 tailpiece

A fairly wide and flat neck with low-ish frets makes it feel wonderfully slick for lead runs, the only snag being the pickguard: as it's been positioned over the neck pickup surround, it's very close to the high E string and can get in the way of the right hand unless you're a very disciplined picker. You can always remove it, of course.

These pickups are no less noisy than your traditional P-90s but they can handle relatively high levels of gain just fine as long as you don't require biting treble and don't mind slightly mushy chords. It is a big body but the centre-block helps to keep things under control. There's certainly feedback there if you want it though, opening up all kinds of fun with the Bigsby.

The first benefit of the Junior model's scaled-down design is that the arm of the Bigsby B50 is closer to the pickups and therefore easier to grab while mid-widdle. Like the B70 on its sibling, it does its gently wobbly job without issues and stays in tune pretty well. There is a bit less feedback to play with here though, a natural side-effect of this guitar's tighter and less swirly tone.

It doesn't sound as big as its full-size sibling, then. But it's no less of a charmer. Overdriven chords have more clarity but that's because of the low-end content that's been removed rather than any added treble: played clean, the Junior has a similar tonal profile, just with more immediacy and less fullness.

Arpeggios in the middle position sound just as sweet here but are more pure and perky; it's surprising how much more lively this guitar feels just because there's less wood and air involved in its construction. Any jazzy stuff with the neck pickup loses the low-end whump of the G2622T but some players might be quite happy about that. We're getting strong vibes of the

High fidelity: both guitars feature twin FideliSonic 90 pickups

Epiphone Wildkat here, which is perhaps no great shock given that underrated guitar is also a small-bodied semi with twin P-90 pickups and a Bigsby.

Like the G5622 model we reviewed in issue 393, these semi-hollow guitars are pushing the boundaries of what the company still calls "that great Gretsch sound". But with those FideliSonic 90s pushing that sound so much further towards mellow soulfulness, only you can decide whether you're willing to follow.

KEY FEATURES

G2622T-P90 STREAMLINER CENTER BLOCK
PRICE £609
DESCRIPTION Six-string semi-hollow electric guitar, made in Indonesia
BUILD Double-cutaway mahogany laminate body with chambered spruce centre-block, set nato neck with 12" radius bound laurel fingerboard, oval inlays, 22 medium jumbo frets and synthetic bone nut
HARDWARE Adjusto-Matic bridge with Bigsby B70 vibrato, vintage-style tuners
ELECTRONICS 2x FideliSonic 90 single-coil pickups, master volume and tone plus individual volume controls, three-way pickup switch
SCALE LENGTH 24.75"/629mm
NECK WIDTH 42.7mm at nut, 53.6mm at 12th fret
NECK DEPTH 21.1mm at first fret, 23.8mm at 12th fret
STRING SPACING 35mm at nut, 51.5mm at bridge
WEIGHT 3.2kg/7.1lb
FINISH Forge Glow (as reviewed), Brownstone, Gunmetal
LEFT-HANDERS No
CONTACT gretschguitars.com

8/10 **A likeable semi that lives at the mild-mannered end of the Gretsch-Gibson crossover area**

LIKE THIS? TRY THESE...

D'Angelico Deluxe DC LE **£1,650**
Guild X-175B Manhattan **£1,025**
Ibanez AS63T **£449**

KEY FEATURES

G2655T-P90 STREAMLINER CENTER BLOCK JR
PRICE £609
DESCRIPTION Six-string semi-hollow electric guitar, made in Indonesia
BUILD Double-cutaway mahogany laminate body with chambered spruce centre-block, set nato neck with 12" radius bound laurel fingerboard, oval inlays, 22 medium jumbo frets and synthetic bone nut
HARDWARE Adjusto-Matic bridge with Bigsby B50 vibrato, vintage-style tuners
ELECTRONICS 2x FideliSonic 90 single-coil pickups, master volume and tone plus individual volume controls, three-way pickup switch
SCALE LENGTH 24.75"/629mm
NECK WIDTH 42.7mm at nut, 53.2mm at 12th fret
NECK DEPTH 21mm at first fret, 23.5mm at 12th fret
STRING SPACING 35mm at nut, 51.5mm at bridge
WEIGHT 2.8kg/6.2lb
FINISH Sahara Metallic (as reviewed), Mint Metallic, Midnight Sapphire (all with natural back and sides)
LEFT-HANDERS No

8/10 **A more snappy alternative to the bigger guitar but with the same fundamental sweetness of voice**

LIKE THIS? TRY THESE...

Duesenberg Fullerton TV **£2,049**
Harmony Comet **£1,499**
Epiphone Wildkat **£419**

FENDER

’68 CUSTOM PRO REVERB & VIBRO CHAMP REVERB

WORDS RICHARD PURVIS

Mixing period-correct looks with modernised specs, can this pair of new combos help rehabilitate the reputation of Fender’s silverface years?

People often get upset when you mess about with the classics. But with the not-quite-classics, it’s a different story. Fender’s silverface amplifiers of the CBS era don’t get nearly as much love as the black-panelled icons that preceded them – and that represents something of an inviting blank canvas for the ’68 Custom series.

First launched in 2014, these amps take the semi-vintage combos of that 1967-1981 period and reimagine them for the modern player. And now we have two new models to choose from, based on the heavy-hitting 40-watt Pro Reverb and the peppy puppy that is the five-watt Vibro Champ.

As with the other ’68 Custom amps, the look here is scrupulously authentic: brushed aluminium control panels with turquoise lettering, top-hat knobs, matching silver/turquoise grille cloth, even that mildly ridiculous hyphen before the word ‘amp’. But the jewel lights are blue and not red, which also hints at bigger changes under the bonnet.

In the case of the Pro Reverb, the most obvious change is that it has lost a channel and a speaker. This is a single-channel 1x12 combo rather than a 2x12, with a Celestion G12 Neo Creamback (rated at 60 watts) doing all of the air-pushing on its own.

Switch-hitter: the Pro Reverb comes with a vintage-style reverb/ tremolo footswitch

This slimming down has helped to decrease the size and weight, making the Pro Reverb a feasible one-hand carry.

Fender also promises reduced negative feedback "for greater touch-sensitivity" and, in the absence of tube rectification, what the brand calls "rectifier sag built into the power transformer" – which might just mean it's a slightly undersized one. This is still a 40-watt amp though, with two 6L6 output valves, and tube-driven spring reverb and tremolo via the supplied vintage-style footswitch.

Uniform approach: both amps boast brushed aluminium panels and top-hat knobs

The Champ also messes with the speaker formula but this time heading in the opposite direction: the original's eight-inch honker has been replaced by a 10-inch Celestion G10R-30, squeezed into the shallow cab with barely a millimetre to spare. In the pursuit of fuller, less boxy tones, this upgrade seems like a no-brainer.

Again, the basics of the circuit remain true to the original, complete with valve-driven tremolo and a single 6V6 on output duty. However, as you might have guessed from the name, reverb has been added. There's no room for a tank in here though, so that reverb is digital, with Fender opting for a smooth hall type instead of emulating its usual bouncy spring sounds. You don't get a footswitch this time either but there is an input for one round the back (they are available for about £60).

These Mexican-built amps use PCBs rather than the handwiring of the originals. But aside from the bright switch on our Pro Reverb feeling disconcertingly loose, we've no complaints about how they've been put together. A peek into the belly of the bigger amp reveals a simple-looking main board with hardly any parallel tracks, while all the valve bases are mounted to the stiff metal of the chassis.

IN USE

As a combo with more power than a Deluxe Reverb but less headroom than a Twin Reverb, the original silverface Pro was a natural compromise between those

Speak up: the Vibro Champ Reverb sports a 10-inch Celestion G10R-30 driver

two extremes of gig-friendliness. And despite a clear shift in the direction of the smaller amp, that's still broadly where the new version sits.

Turn the up volume to about three and a classic Fender clean tone leaps straight into action. With a Telecaster, proceedings stay scuzz-free up to about five, by which point things have got beautifully big and sparkly. It's nowhere near as loud as an 85-watt Twin, obviously, but you can feel the weight in the bass that tells you this is no late-night bedroom strummer.

The Pro Reverb gained a middle control in the late 1970s and that's been retained here in a three-way tonestack that allows for comprehensive tone-sculpting to suit the guitar you're using. If that guitar sports single-coil pickups, you'll probably want to keep the bright switch off as it's pretty potent.

There's enough headroom here for dirt pedals to have a fine old time, but the amp itself will happily throw a bit of grit into the mixer too, even if it gets a bit scrappy when pushed hard. Whacking the bass knob down to zero provides a bit of additional clarity without killing all the low-end heft but this is more of a low-gain cruncher than a full-on rocker.

We don't have a huge amount to say about the tremolo and the reverb. Both are predictably great. Although, if our review amp is anything to go by, you probably won't want to push the latter past about the halfway mark: the resulting low-level background roar is somewhat reminiscent of a storm at sea.

Cream of the crop: the Pro comes with a lightweight G12 Neo Creamback installed

In pure tonal terms, the little Champ is closer to the Pro than you might expect. The move up to a 10-inch speaker has clearly made a big difference to this amp's voicing. It's still firmly in 'small combo' territory, but this is no yappy upstart.

In fact, the smallest thing here is the range of usable clean tones on offer: with average-output pickups, it sounds fairly flat until a little past four on the volume control, at which point it suddenly blossoms into spanky life… but is already breaking up by the time you push it past six.

Still, for an amp with one output tube, there's not a lot wrong with those cleans. Despite the lack of openness at both ends of the frequency spectrum, it's smooth and balanced, surprisingly happy to play with drive pedals, and with a likeable transition into edgy crunch. Again, things get rough right at the top of the dial but you can ease that congestion by turning down the bass; the result this time is a raspy rock grind that's almost Plexi-esque.

Again, the tremolo is lovely and, while it feels odd to dial in hall reverb on an amp of this type, there's no denying that it works. You can even go full-on cowshed ambience if you don't mind a bit of background hiss. Oh, and an the subject of unwanted noise, as with most single-ended designs, there is some operating hum but it's not obtrusive.

There's an argument that these amps are a little overpriced given what handwired US originals are going for nowadays. But if you'd rather buy new, they both make a strong case that there's no longer any shame in settling for silver.

KEY FEATURES

'68 CUSTOM PRO REVERB
PRICE £1,349
DESCRIPTION Single-channel all-valve combo with reverb and tremolo, made in Mexico
POWER RATING 40W
CONTROLS Two inputs, bright switch, volume, treble, middle, bass, reverb, tremolo speed, tremolo intensity
REAR PANEL Power, standby, 2x speaker outputs, input for reverb/tremolo footswitch (included)
VALVES 3x 12AX7, 2x 12AT7, 2x 6L6
SPEAKER 1x Celestion G12 Neo Creamback
DIMENSIONS 568 x 436 x 237mm
WEIGHT 15.9kg/35lb
CONTACT fender.com

8/10 **A no-nonsense clean machine that breaks up nicely and gets on great with pedals**

LIKE THIS? TRY THESE...

Victory V40D Duchess Deluxe Combo **£1,769**
Blackstar HT Club 40 MkII 6L6 **£789**
Fender Hot Rod Deluxe IV **£909**

KEY FEATURES

'68 CUSTOM VIBRO CHAMP REVERB
PRICE £799
DESCRIPTION Single-channel all-valve combo with reverb and tremolo, made in Mexico
POWER RATING 5W
CONTROLS Two inputs, bright switch, volume, treble, bass, reverb, tremolo speed, tremolo intensity
REAR PANEL Power, 1x speaker output, input for reverb/tremolo footswitch (not included)
VALVES 2x 12AX7, 1x 6V6
SPEAKER 1x Celestion G10R-30
DIMENSIONS 429 x 356 x 206mm
WEIGHT 9.25kg/20.4lb

8/10 **A smart scaled-down alternative to the Pro that's ideal for low-level practice**

LIKE THIS? TRY THESE...

Supro '64 Reverb **£899**
Tone King Gremlin Combo **£1,249**
Rift Amplification PR6 **£2,169**

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Peredur ap Gwynedd, *Pendulum*

rate depth sweep

shape voice

feedback d-f-v

POLYCHROME

WALRUS AUDIO

VIBRO CHAMP®

REVERB-AMP

Raise your voice: toggle switches allow you to alter the LFO shape and voicing

Lizard wizard: the Polychrome's colourful skin can brighten up any pedalboard

WALRUS AUDIO
POLYCHROME ANALOG FLANGER

Guitar EDITOR'S CHOICE

WORDS MICHAEL WATTS

The heady swirl of a flanger is something of a niche guitar effect but could this pedal of many colours convert the naysayers?

The latest addition to Oklahoma company Walrus Audio's portfolio of cutting-edge stompboxes is the Polychrome Analog Flanger. Positively bristling with features inherited from the acclaimed Julia chorus and Lillian phaser, the Polychrome promises the impressive audio quality synonymous with the brand and comes complete with multicoloured lizard graphics. Of course it does.

Most guitarists regard flange as something of an occasional flavour, and the functionality offered by most analogue stompbox flangers is correspondingly limited. That said, the Polychrome provides users with the kind of options rarely experienced outside digital or even laptop-based signal chains.

The control panel boasts five knobs. Rate and depth are for the LFO driving the flanger, while sweep shifts the frequency range to which filtering is applied, giving you a spectrum of sound from traditional to tight and chewy to more extreme deep-flange textures. The feedback knob controls the amount of affected signal being cycled back through the circuit, and the more you add, the wilder things are likely to become. We make a mental note to crank this one to full when we plug in. Finally, there's a Walrus calling card – a mysterious blend knob which is labelled d-f-v for dry, flange and vibrato, respectively.

Walrus has also sneaked in a pair of mini toggle switches: the shape switch gives you a choice of sine, triangle or random LFO waveforms, whereas the voice toggle flicks between a full-frequency flange and a notched flange with less bottom. While that's already a lot of features to pack into one compact pedal, we're not done yet. That's no ordinary footswitch. Instead, it's a smart momentary bypass switch, which in bypass mode will keep the effect activated for as long as you dare keep your foot on it. How debonair!

IN USE

There's a characteristic richness to every Walrus Audio pedal we've encountered and that's true for the Polychrome too. Yes, the sheer amount of tonal options on offer is impressive but they mean nothing without a good, or in this case excellent, core sound to build upon.

The chief areas of interest for those flange-curious players will be in wobbly chords and jumbo jet take-off whooshes. The Polychrome is capable of a cornucopia of such textures, from subtle shimmers to almost ring-modulated madness.

In the life of a stompbox aficionado, it's an increasingly rare occurrence to be able to say, "I've never heard this before". Yet these words left our lips on several occasions during our time with the Polychrome, including one particularly glorious experience when we could discern upper partial harmonics sliding into fleeting moments of feedback during an arpeggiated chord sequence as if they had a life of their own. If your flange needs veer towards the basic, you may feel this is overkill. But we'd recommend the Polychrome to even the most casual users. The Walrus team has once again given us something new and delicious to explore.

KEY FEATURES

PRICE £179
DESCRIPTION Analogue flanger pedal, made in the USA
CONTROLS Rate, depth, sweep, feedback, dry-flange-vibrato blend knobs, shape and voice mini toggles
FEATURES Soft switch relay bypassing, 9V DC mains power only (50mA minimum)
DIMENSIONS 115 x 66 x 59mm
CONTACT face.be, walrusaudio.com

9/10 **Superb core sounds and a wild array of tonal options make this a worthy addition to the Walrus line**

LIKE THIS? TRY THESE...

MXR M117R Flanger **£179**
ThorpyFX Camoflange **£265**
Spaceman Effects Aurora Analog Flanger **£319**

THORPYFX
PULSE DOPPLER

WORDS RICHARD PURVIS

The latest ThorpyFX reboot of a Lovetone classic turns down the distortion and cranks up the modulation – but that doesn't make the ride any less wild

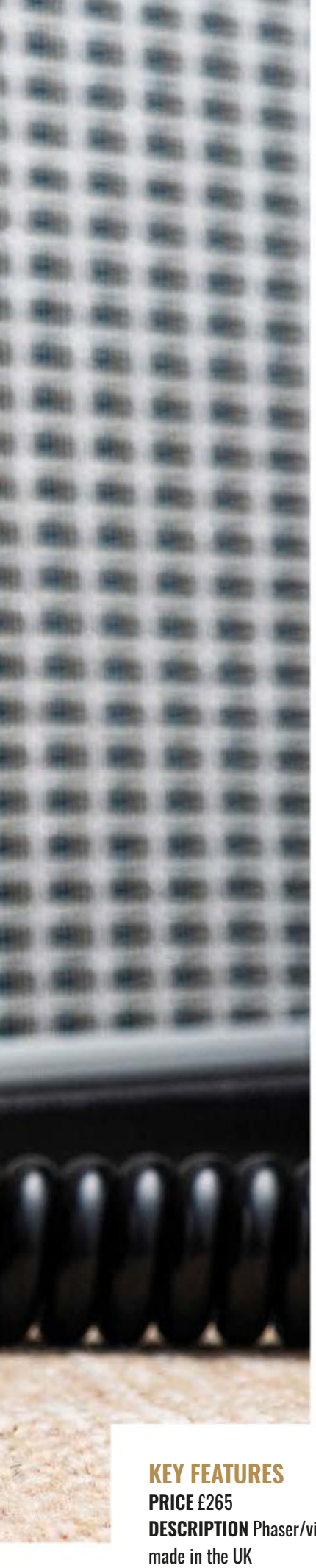
The arrival of a new black-boxed device from ThorpyFX is always big news for stompbox connoisseurs. This moody look is the uniform of the company's unofficial Lovetone MkII range, which is based on some of the most influential boutique pedals ever made. This new addition, the third in the series, is the most ambitious yet.

Created in collaboration with original Lovetone designer Dan Coggins, the Pulse Doppler is inspired by the Doppelganger phaser/vibrato of 1995. But while ThorpyFX founder Adrian Thorpe was careful not to stray too far from Coggins' original circuits with his Field Marshal and Bunker pedals, this one has apparently been redesigned from the ground up.

Is that good news or bad? You'll have to read the rest of this review before you answer that question. First, the basics. This is an analogue twin-notch phaser with a wide range of operating modes to cover numerous phasing tones, plus pitch-wobbling vibrato, pure tremolo and various points in between. It's a lot smaller and more pedalboard-friendly than the Doppelganger, not to mention a whole lot more affordable, but it hardly skimps on complexity.

Normally at this point, we'd run through all of the pedal's controls alongside a brief summary of what each one is supposed to do. That's not really feasible here – they are all so interactive, the knobs behaving so differently depending on where the switches are set, that we might be better off just cracking on with the testing.

Special operations: with its look and controls, this pedal feels like military hardware



Step up: additional outputs increase the pedal's versatility even further

KEY FEATURES

PRICE £265
DESCRIPTION Phaser/vibrato/tremolo pedal, made in the UK
CONTROLS Enhance, manual, depth, blend, rate; dual/figure-of-eight and normal/pulse/invert toggle switches, bypass and vibrato/phaser footswitches
FEATURES Wet and dry outputs, buffered bypass, powered by 9-volt mains supply only (not supplied)
DIMENSIONS 130 x 108 x 57mm
CONTACT thorpyfx.com

IN USE

Half an hour after sparking up this pedal for the first time, we were on the phone to Adrian to ask him what was wrong with it. Nothing, as it turned out. But the Pulse Doppler is very much not a plug-and-play phaser. By the time you read this, there should be some sample settings on the ThorpyFX website – we urge you to study them before you attempt to fly this thing solo.

There is at least one straightforward phase-shifting effect in here somewhere. It's very Doppelganger-esque and very pretty, with a deeply chewy texture and a throbbing volume bump towards the low end of the sweep that can be tamed by flipping to invert mode.

The best thing about this sound is that you can adjust the frequency range of the swirl in a way that dramatically alters its tonal character; the worst thing is that all of this happens between 11 and 12 o'clock on the manual knob – stray outside of that zone and the effect virtually dies.

Tremolo's up next, with an intense yet naturally rising and falling waveform that's very likeable. Here it's the depth control that needs careful management – the modulation vanishes anywhere below one o'clock and begins to get motorboaty if it's pushed beyond three, but again there's scope for tweaking.

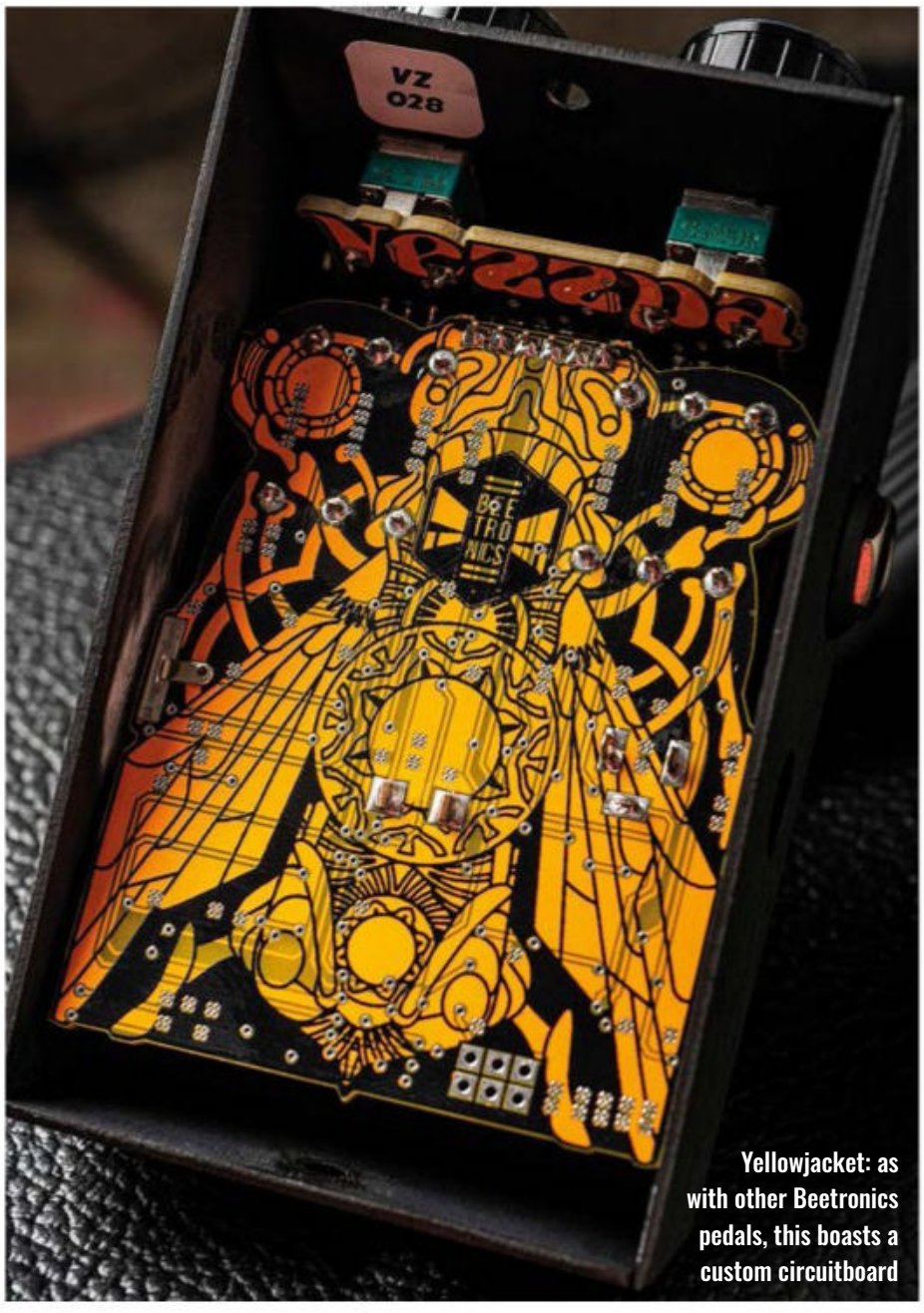
There's plenty more to explore. Cranking the enhance knob brings some pew-pew synth effects and, yes, there's pitch vibrato too, which sounds lovely as long as you have everything set just so. And that's the Pulse Doppler in a nutshell: it's a complicated pedal that's a minefield to navigate but packs just enough sonic treasures to make the journey worthwhile. G

8/10 **A treat for fans of modulation despite its sometimes frustrating interface**

LIKE THIS? TRY THESE...

EarthQuaker Devices Grand Orbiter V3 **£205**
Old Blood Noise Endeavors Visitor **£199**
Universal Audio Astra **£355**

STINGER
FUZZZZ
INFINITY



Yellowjacket: as with other Beetronics pedals, this boasts a custom circuitboard

Jewel wasp: the Vezzpa's enclosure has a characteristically intricate design

KEY FEATURES

PRICE £215
DESCRIPTION Twin-voice fuzz octave pedal, made in the USA
CONTROLS Fuzzzz sustain and Stinger high-octave knobs. Smart momentary footswitch
FEATURES 9V DC power supply only
DIMENSIONS 106 x 44 x 64mm
CONTACT face.be, beetronicsfx.com

BEETRONICS

VEZZPA OCTAVE STINGER

Guitar EDITOR'S CHOICE

WORDS MICHAEL WATTS

This diminutive but ferocious new release from Beetronics provides yet more evidence that the Californian brand deserves its place in the higher echelons of the boutique pedal swarm

In a twist on the company's original Hymenoptera theme, the brand-new Vezzpa Octave Stinger from Beetronics is more wasp than bee, promising a range of super-aggressive and spitty fuzz tones with an upper octave thrown in for good measure. Presumably while hovering around your jam sandwich and somehow always managing to be right behind you…

Built around op-amp circuitry, this diminutive pedal from Beetronics' Babee Series – about a quarter of the size of the now legendary Royal Jelly – features two modes. Fuzzzz promises a powerchord-friendly wall of pollen-laden fur, while the Stinger mode unleashes a high-octave voicing that the company describes as "harmonics on crack". Sounds ideal.

At the heart (or possibly thorax) of the Vezzpa is a multi-function footswitch. A single tap turns the pedal on and off, while in bypass mode the footswitch operates in momentary mode, delivering functionality that's more akin to a killswitch. You can toggle between sounds with a double tap and, with the pedal engaged, holding down the button gives you a blast of the unit's other voice until you lift your foot back off it. On paper, this all sounds a little convoluted so we're interested to see how it pans out in practice.

From a tweakability perspective, there is a brace of top-mounted knobs, one for each voice. But that's it. As usual with Beetronics, the minuscule labelling on the pedal requires compound eyes to see clearly at a distance, but thankfully there are three colour-coded LEDs to guide you: yellow for Fuzzzz, green for Stinger, and red for on/off.

IN USE

When handed a fuzz pedal whose stated aim is engendering multifaceted vespid velcro violence, we feel a duty of care to make sure we run it in front of a tube amp with a full midrange on the edge of breakup. With an old Cornford Hurricane and a Trussart Deluxe Steelcaster in hand, we plug in, select the Fuzzzz voice and give it some – and it is wonderful.

Beetronics has a knack for stripping down tones to their quintessence – a kind of sonic alchemy that allows you to ride a one-control fuzz pedal into the flames of battle fully confident that it will respond to your touch and hand placement, and give you all the sonic versatility you could ask for, from never-ending chainsaw to choked-out and stuttering. Stinger mode unleashes a squall of octave overtones that will neatly mince your sound into small wet cubes and tip it over the grateful upturned faces of your audience. It's not a whammy effect exactly, more like instant upper-partial feedback that renders harmonics into delicious chaos.

The multi-function footswitch is a particularly stylish touch and using it to add fuzzed-out accents can elevate even a pedestrian riff to stratospheric heights. If your fuzz heroes are Jack White or Annie Clark, then look no further. This is pretty divine.

9/10 **Unashamed, intuitive fuzz joy from a brand that never fails to inspire. One of our favourite pedals of 2021 so far**

LIKE THIS? TRY THESE...

Danelectro 3699 **£159**
Fjord Fuzz Odin **£149**
Redbeard Effects Honey Badger **£199**

REDBEARD EFFECTS

ANGRY RHUBARB PARADYNAMIC OVERDRIVE MKII

Guitar EDITOR'S CHOICE

WORDS RICHARD PURVIS

This new British brand's first two pedals impressed us with their versatility and filth-generating power. But the third might just be the best Redbeard effect yet

Rhubarb has every right to be angry: it's a chronically underrated fruit. So maybe this latest pedal from Redbeard Effects – an overdrive with three separate gain controls, one of them focused on an adjustable frequency band – will help to boost its profile among crumble-loving guitar players worldwide.

But first, a quick reminder of who we're dealing with here. Redbeard is a collaborative venture between Skindred guitarist Mikey Demus and ThorpyFX supremo Adrian Thorpe, with an ethos that involves combining classic tones with clever controls to offer something a little different.

In this case, the clue lies in the slightly made-up word 'paradynamic', which refers to its frequency-shiftable tone circuit (it's not fully parametric because the bandwidth is fixed). The basics, aside from two bright pink knobs that stick out of the pedal like chunks of actual rhubarb, are as before: it's a folded metal compact enclosure, this time in fruity magenta, with top-mounted jacks and a matte-black control surface. Before you ask, yes, the status LED is also pink and, no, there isn't an Angry Rhubarb MkI.

Those controls are intriguingly unconventional. We start at the bottom left with pre drive, which is our first source of gain; then we move into the colourful shape section, which has up to 6dB of cut or boost centred on the frequency of your choice; and then we head up to post drive, offering

Tone shapers: cut or boost anywhere on the spectrum with the Rhubarb's pink knobs

Drive angry: the pedal's post drive control provides gain and an untamed tone

more dirt on the way out. Basically, it's the preamp > tonestack > power amp journey of a valve amplifier. All of which is promising.

IN USE

Exploring the Angry Rhubarb feels like Christmas for devoted fans of gain. But you can't play with all your presents at once, so let's start at the beginning, with the shape knobs centred, the post drive at minimum, and just a little bit of grit coming from the first part of the circuit.

Our starting low-gain tone is an instant winner: pretty much transparent in the mids, sweetly crispy up top and with a nice bit of Tube Screamer-style compression. The tone fattens up a little as we crank the gain towards maximum, but it stays smooth and disciplined.

KEY FEATURES

PRICE £185
DESCRIPTION Overdrive pedal, made in the UK
CONTROLS Volume, post drive, pre drive, frequency gain, frequency
FEATURES True bypass, powered by 9V mains supply only (not included)
DIMENSIONS 126 x 70 x 60mm
CONTACT redbeardeffects.com

The post drive control makes for an interesting contrast. In terms of voicing it's broadly similar but there's more gain on tap here and it has a much wilder, zingier feel. We recommend setting the pre drive stage where you want it then dialling in just the right amount of post according to how reckless/inspired/angry you're feeling.

That just leaves the pink section… and it's not quite what we were expecting. This isn't just about flipping between honky stuck-wah tones and extreme nu-metal scoopage. There's a bit of that on offer but the essence of the Angry Rhubarb is more subtle, more musical. The lack of Q control certainly isn't a problem: you can cut or boost pretty much anywhere along the frequency spectrum and know you'll end up with something rich, natural and, above all, genuinely useful. It's uncannily brilliant and all adds up to what can only be described as a bit of a masterpiece.

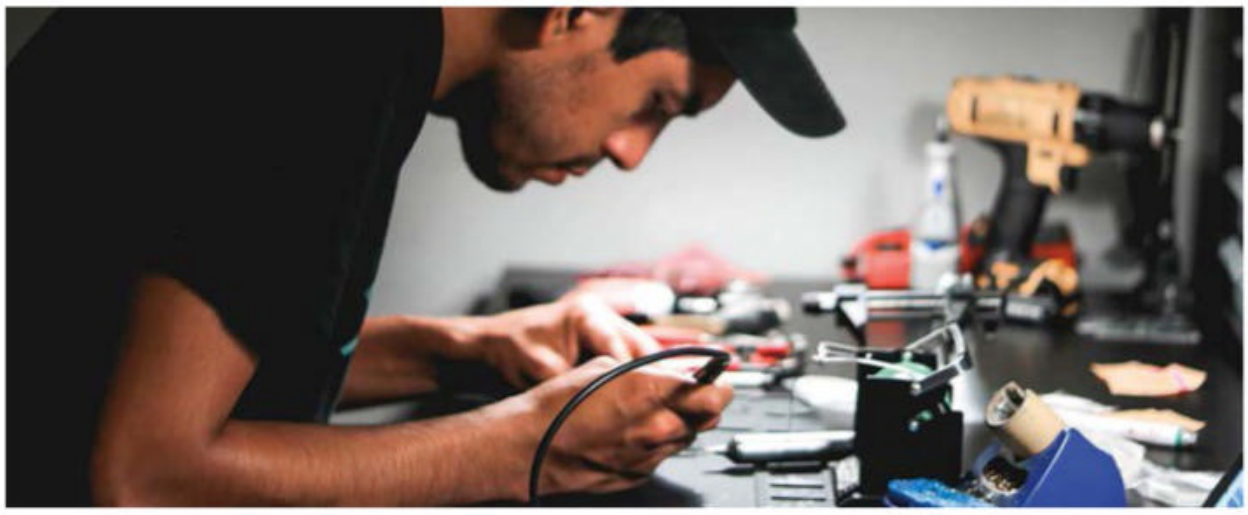
10/10 **This simple yet super-tweakable dirt machine deserves to become a classic**

LIKE THIS? TRY THESE...

Stone Deaf PDF-1X **£170**
Spaceman Polaris **£349**
Cole Paradrive **$189**

LEFT The Midnight V2 is an analogue phaser with five waveforms

BELOW The Kiaayo provides asymmetrical clipping for dynamic amp-like overdrive



INDUSTRY INSIDER

NATIVEAUDIO

INTERVIEW SAM ROBERTS

Based in Dayton, Ohio, this new pedal brand is winning fans across the globe thanks to owner Mike Trombey's talent for building powerful, superb-sounding and user-friendly pedals, with unique artwork inspired by his Blackfeet (Amsskaapipiikuni) heritage

How did you get into guitar?

"During high school I came across *Guitar Hero* and the game inspired me to pick up a real guitar, which I haven't put down since."

When did you start building or tinkering with effects?

"I started building and tinkering with effect pedals during my undergraduate studies for electrical engineering. The schooling kind of went in parallel with my understanding of circuits. The more I learnt from school, the more I'd apply to my own personal designs."

When did you realise you had a viable business?

"I had been building pedals and sharing my builds with local Dayton musicians during my undergraduate studies. After seeing the demand, I knew I was onto something."

Did you have any external investment starting out?

"No way – moving at the speed of cash and working to improve my business knowledge, while learning from my setbacks."

When did you feel like you'd nailed your branding?

"After I released my third product, I noticed that my products had a minimalist look and the artwork started to relate to my Native American heritage. It was at that point that I liked the simplicity of the pedals' layout, and each graphic had a unique story. Alex Scalgia here in Ohio does all of my artwork and he's been doing it since the start of the company. Coming up with the artwork is not challenging given that my heritage runs deep with so many stories that have shaped us – but it can be challenging to come up with artwork that tells a story well."

The Ghost Ridge pedal features four reverb algorithms and four programmable presets

Founder Mike Trombey pays homage to his ancestry with every pedal he produces

How did you come up with your best-selling product?
"It was out of necessity. I'm a simple dude and needed a reverb that was easy to use. I loved the idea of multiple reverbs and presets but the units on the market at the time were over-complicated. Our Ghost Ridge ended up answering my needs for multiple reverbs and presets, while still keeping things minimal."

What has been the response towards your work from the Blackfeet community?
"I've had many family members and friends from the Blackfeet Reservation reach out and share how cool it is to see someone sharing stories and bringing light to our Blackfeet ancestry. A lot of the members from the community don't play guitar but they support the brand in other ways like picking up NativeAudio t-shirts. It's always cool coming home and seeing others wearing NativeAudio stuff."

What's your proudest moment as a maker?
"Probably the day I finally paid myself as business owner. That was the day that I knew this wasn't a hobby and that I was actually a pursuing an adventure with the mission to inspire others with creativity."

For more on NativeAudio and the Blackfeet Nation, visit nativeaudio.com and blackfeetnation.com

SHOP TALK

MIKE BARANIK
BARANIK GUITARS

WORDS DAVE HUNTER
PHOTOGRAPHY BARANIK GUITARS

Mike Baranik's fun and ultra-hip line of retro-inspired reworkings of 1960s catalogue-style guitars may have caught a few fans off guard, but the results are no less breathtaking than expected

Like many of today's noteworthy guitar makers, Mike Baranik's interest in the instrument began when he was a young player. Unlike so many musicians, however, his leap into a proper course of training in the craft of building the instruments came out of an epiphanic blast of common sense.

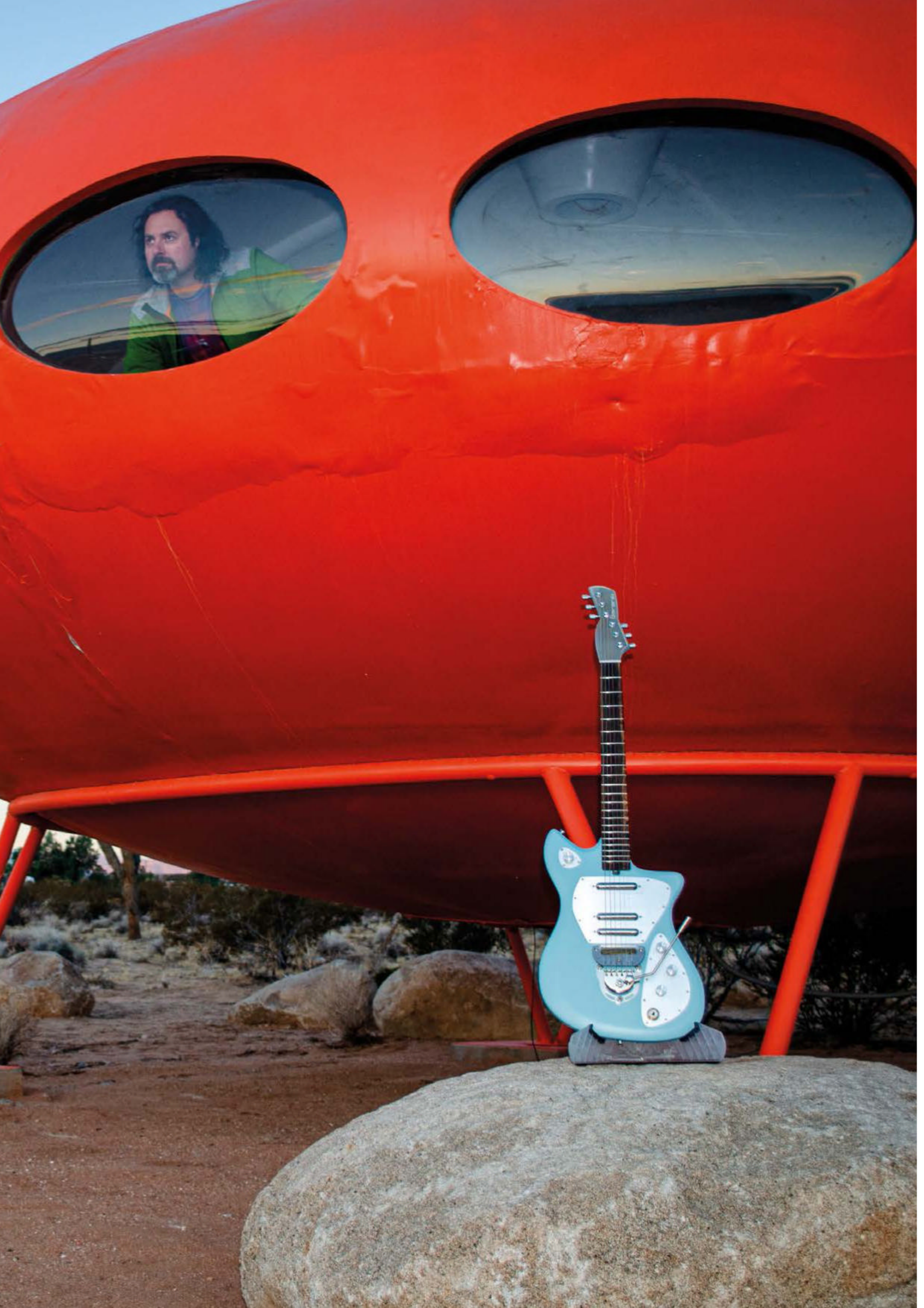
Baranik was born on Vandenberg Air Force Base in Lompoc, California, in the early 1970s – and the westward lean of the US guitar industry would lure him back that way in later years. He grew up, however, on the opposite coast, over in Vernon, New Jersey, the location of the notorious Action Park amusement and water park – nicknamed Accident Park and the subject of 2020 doc *Class Action Park* – where he worked for three summers as a teen. But his real motivations had nothing to do with wild rides or waterborne infections.

"I was a teenager in the mid-1980s," says Baranik, "and it was really hard not to be interested in the guitar at the time. I got my first guitar from the Sears catalogue, a right-handed Flying V. I'm a lefty but I'm a bit ambidextrous so, when I couldn't find a lefty guitar, I decided to teach myself how to play right-handed. It was definitely a hard thing to do, especially using my right hand for picking and learning Van Halen and Satriani licks."

Baranik spent much of his time obsessing over practising and playing. But he would also takes his guitars apart to get a glimpse behind the curtain. "I was really interested in tremolos and the electronics," he says. "We had a family vacation to California when I was 17 and, while in Los Angeles, we toured the Musicians Institute. My friend and I saw Satriani at the Roxy on the *Surfing With The Alien* tour, and I thought, 'This is it, I'm moving to LA and going to GIT [the Guitar Institute of Technology] after high school!'"

WAKE-UP CALL

Baranik moved to LA in his late teens and got a job working at the legendary Tower Records shop on Sunset Strip while preparing to attend GIT. But even this early exposure to the scene unveiled just how many talented guitarists were already pounding the pavements of Tinseltown in search of work.



"I realised that this wasn't the smartest career path," says Baranik of the moment he clocked how difficult securing guitar-based opportunities might be. But then something else came along.

"One day I was flipping through a guitar magazine and saw an ad for the Roberto-Venn School of Luthiery in Phoenix, Arizona. I didn't even realise you could build guitars; I thought that they just came from a factory. It really intrigued me. I got a brochure, applied to the school and attended in the fall of 1993. I was super-nervous, with very little woodworking experience. But that didn't really matter. Once I started learning, I was hooked. I absolutely loved it and the four-month course just flew by."

After completing the course, Baranik begged the head instructor John Reuter to let him stay on as an apprentice. Six months later he was then hired as an assistant instructor for a few classes. From there, he landed a job building for a new local maker, Phoenix Guitar Company, where in addition to focusing on electrics, he began learning acoustic guitar-making from his friend and roommate Kent Hamblin.

Phoenix closed down after only a year but the shop-foreman position Baranik then landed at a local woodworking store proved a blessing at that stage in his career. "I learnt some new woodworking skills," he says. "But what I really learnt was about the different types of wood, and spent most of my paycheck buying exotic woods. Physically it was a really tough job, and one of the customers offered me a position at his high-end furniture studio with better pay and access to the shop, so I accepted."

GOLDEN AGE

The facilities and the proximity to excellent wood accelerated Baranik's move into acoustic guitars and, after several months pursuing the effort on the side, he completed two flat-tops that he took to an acoustic guitar festival in California:

"This was 1997 and it was perfect timing," he says, "the start of the golden age of luthiery. I showed up and attended some workshops, Jim Olson had one of his jigs and was demonstrating his building techniques and I asked pretty much every luthier if they would look at my guitars. I got some amazing feedback and really enjoyed the show, so I basically decided to start my business right after. It was similar to going to California in the 1980s, deciding instantly, 'This is it – I'm going to start making acoustic guitars for a living!'"

And make he did. Baranik earned a top-flight reputation impressively quickly, along with a long wait list for orders. In 2006, he moved the business from Arizona to California and was still in a full-on acoustic obsession until about 2012, when the itch to go electric again became overwhelming.

"I started getting into bands that used lots of pedals," he says, "and it made me want to start playing again. Also, there was a connection to when I first started building guitars, which were electrics, so it was kind of a homecoming but also a bit of nostalgia creeping in, a return to my youth. Doing both acoustics and electrics has brought that excitement back. I've also connected with some musicians that I've been a huge fan of and working with them has been an amazing experience.

> “I HAVE ALWAYS LOVED WEIRD GUITARS THAT HAD THEIR OWN PERSONALITY. THE PROBLEM WITH A LOT OF THOSE GUITARS IS THAT THEY’RE USUALLY HARD TO PLAY”

Especially this past year, with no live concerts. To have my guitars being used on TV and livestreams has really kept me going.”

PAWNSHOP CHIC

Baranik is not the only maker to have transitioned from an acoustic-only workshop to also crafting solidbody electrics. But when most top-tier luthiers go down that route, they tend to embrace some of the same acoustic traditions and refinement in their electrics, much as we saw with Collings’ venture into those territories in the 2000s, for example. Baranik, on the other hand, has gone all in on the quirky B-list charms of the Japanese and Italian budget beauties of the 1960s in his solidbodies. Which isn’t to say that they don’t have an elegance and refinement of their own. But they’re definitely coming at us from way out of leftfield.

“I have always loved the weird guitars that just had their own personality,” he says. “The problem with a lot of those guitars, though, especially the ones from Japan, is that they’re usually hard to play. I have a couple Teisco guitars and they look and sound amazing but the necks are really thick, there’s no truss rod, the frets are uneven, the hardware isn’t so great. So I take a lot of inspiration from these guitars and design something that looks along those lines but then give it the best possible playability and tonal options.”

The playability and tone of Baranik’s guitar are of paramount importance to him. “Looks and designs are extremely important but if a guitar doesn’t play and sound great, what’s the point? Things like neck shape, weight balance and ergonomics might not be immediately apparent but are vital for the player to have the best playing experience. The guitar should be an extension of the player. I try to keep the weight down on my electrics, from five and a half to six and a half pounds, depending on the model. And there’s lots of variables that make my guitars their own thing: neck pitch, neck shape, body contours and so forth.”

GOING FOR GOLD

The maker himself is perhaps too modest to mention the ridiculously clever offset three-a-side headstock of his bolt-neck B1 solidbody – a modernistic touch that somehow sits perfectly with the otherwise retro nature

ABOVE Mike Baranik installing frets in his California workshop

OPPOSITE Baranik’s RE1 features a single sliding pickup design

TOP Baranik's offset three-a-side headstock is more than just an eye-catching design

ABOVE LEFT Baranik is a fan of Mojo's custom gold foil pickups

RIGHT The Gina B1 was colour-matched to a 1950s Regina floor scrubber

of the design – but it is perhaps one of this increasingly popular guitar's most distinctive features. More than just an eye-catcher and enabling a straight-line string pull, does it serve some other functional purpose?

"Oh man, thanks for asking," Baranik replies. "The headstock design was really important for me for a couple reasons: I really wanted something that would be totally original but also have form follow function. I really like reverse string pull as it adds tension to the bass strings, making those strings less likely to buzz, especially with a shorter scale, while making the treble strings easier to bend with less tension. It was also important that it would be unique and act as an identifier. I was not sure how people would react but the response to it has been amazing."

The truth is, just about everything on Baranik's solidbody models is distinctive, from their hardware and their pickups to their body shapes and beyond. Yet each one is comfortably appealing and easy to

like. They aren't odd or alien but original, refreshing and approachable.

"Choice of hardware can make or break a design," says Baranik, "whether it's pickups, bridges or knobs. I also try to use stuff that's maybe not the number-one choice that's on every single guitar out there. It can be challenging to find components that are not on everyone's radar and at the same time are high quality. It has led me to making some of my own hardware, which is pretty exciting and does add a level of uniqueness that can set my guitars apart. I just bought a 30-ton press and I'm really excited to start press-forming some metal parts!"

After concerns about running out of the vintage gold foils and lipstick-tube pickups used on some of his early examples, Baranik discovered the similarly inspired creations of UK winder Mojo Pickups, and these acclaimed units have helped his guitars to stand out even further.

"I was instantly attracted to the idea of using pickups that were new stock but based on retro designs," he says. "Marc from Mojo has been great to work with and has customised pickups to my specs. I pulled apart a certain lipstick pickup to try and give Marc the most amount of information to make a copy and it kickstarted the idea to try to make my own pickups. I took apart some old gold foils and studied the construction and designed my own… after about the first 10 prototypes, I had something that I really felt captured the gold foil spirit but had its own voice as well. I'm starting to make a few other pickups, including my own lipstick, and I have this really cool humbucker that's almost done. I've really been enjoying the experience."

PAINT SHOP

Another standout feature on the B1 and RE1 is one of the simplest: the paint. But nothing's quite so straightforward as it might seem in the world of Baranik. Eschewing the popular palette seen on so many other guitars, he goes the extra mile to keep the look original, custom-mixing his paint rather than ordering stock colours.

"I like to take inspiration from anything that catches my eye," he says. "The Gina B1 was colour-matched to a vintage Regina two-tone pink floor scrubber that I found at a garage sale and just had to buy. I've been using ultraviolet-cured finishes for quite a while, which speeds up the process. I'm using a UV-cured acrylic satin topcoat, as I think the low gloss adds a nice feel and look to the vibrant colours."

Other than designing and crafting the guitars himself, one of Baranik's greatest pleasures comes from the opportunity of working with artists that he respects – and, as his reputation continues to grow, that's something he's enjoying more and more of.

"I've been inspired to work with musicians who are interested in or are already pushing boundaries," he says. "Things were already moving towards that before COVID but the pandemic has opened up some connections with musicians who might have not had the time to think about exploring new gear otherwise."

ABOVE A B1 with Mojo's reproductions of vintage Kay "Kleenex box" pickups

Baranik is currently finishing a guitar for LA session player Mason Stoops, who he refers to as "one of the best players in the newer generation of guitarists".

"He's had the RE1 prototype with him since August and it's gotten exposed to so many players, including Harrison Whitford [Phoebe Bridgers] and Ryan Lerman [Ben Folds, Michael Bublé, Scary Pockets]. I asked Mason to get feedback on the prototype and he really delivered, showing it and using it all over Los Angeles and, as a bonus Harrison, has used it on *Saturday Night Live* and *The Late Show With Stephen Colbert*, and Ryan has used it with Scary Pockets."

Not only that but Baranik is also currently working on a guitar for Ruban Nielson of Unknown Mortal Orchestra, another testament to the quality of his builds. "I think Ruban is the definition of a modern-day guitar hero and is always looking to evolve his playing and sound," says Baranik. "I can't wait for live music to start coming back and start seeing some of these guitars being in a live situation. Also, Brad Shultz from Cage The Elephant just got one of my guitars and I'm really looking forward to seeing him use it – he promised me he wouldn't smash it!"

Follow @baranikguitars on Instagram for more

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DIY WORKSHOP

1965 GIBSON FIREBIRD RESTORATION PART TWO

WORDS & PHOTOGRAPHY HUW PRICE

This 1965 Non-Reverse Firebird has really been through the wars. Now it's time to get it structurally stable, install the correct bridge and get take it to the spray booth

It has been a long while since our first instalment of this Non-Reverse Firebird restoration but bad weather and too many other projects got in the way. The guitar also has some serious issues that I've been unsure about fixing but, having devised a plan of action, work recommences.

PLUG HOLES

The owner has decided on a wraptail bridge but, in addition to several plugged holes, the existing holes for the Gotoh bridge bushings are in the wrong positions for a wrapover unit. So first, I need to plug those too.

Placing a 15mm piece of dowel in the centre of each bushing, I tighten bolts into the bushings and they lift out easily. I gauge the hole depth with digital callipers and cut some 12mm mahogany dowels so they'll press in and finish up a few millimetres shy of the surface. I also shape one end of each dowel so that they match the end of the bit that was originally used to drill the holes.

I glue the dowels in with Titebond and, after applying more glue to the tops of the dowels, I then tap 12.7mm tapered mahogany plugs into the holes. I flat-saw the plugs and align the grain to match the body, as this should minimise the chances of the plugs showing through the finish once the guitar has been sprayed. I trim the excess with a flush-cut saw and sand the plugs smooth with the surface.

BRIDGE BUILDING

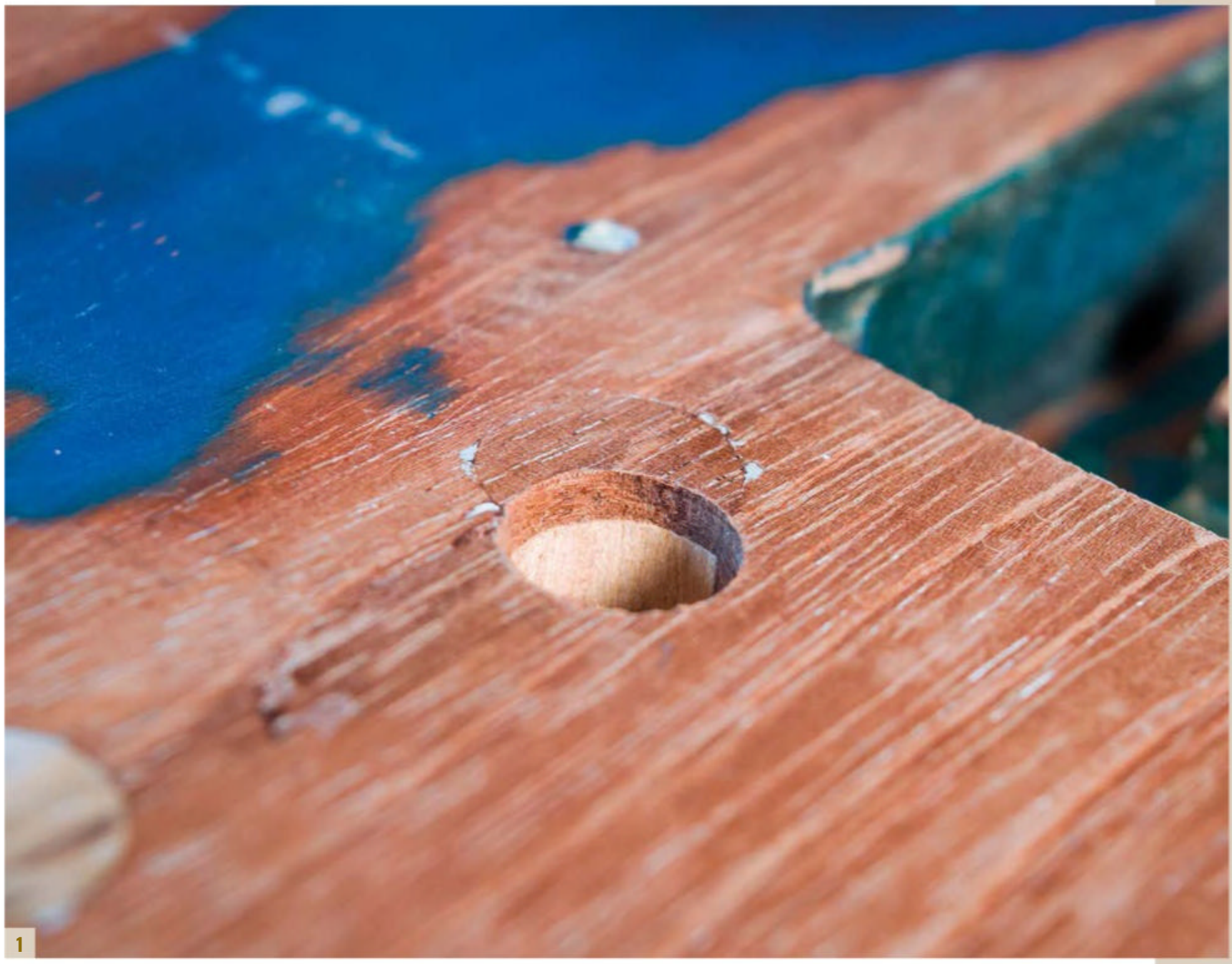
To determine the positions for the new bridge bushings, I begin by laying masking tape over the bridge area. With the Vibrola reinstalled to anchor the strings, I shim the wraptail up on strips of veneer so that I can adjust the height for better action. I then shimmy the bridge back and forth until I'm happy with the intonation for all six strings.

To mark the centre points, I use a brad-point drill bit that fits tightly between the bridge ears and create the new bushing holes using a 13mm brad-point bit in a drill press. I drill a smaller hole through the wall of the treble-side bushing hole into the control cavity. This is used for a new ground wire, which I install before tapping in the new bushings.

With the Firebird's new wraptail bridge installed, I string the guitar up to check that everything lines up and plays nicely. The improvement in tone is extraordinary, with more volume, sustain and body.

HEAD ACHES

This guitar's headstock had been subjected to some unusual modifications. The original six-on-a-plate tuners were replaced with die-cast units and, at some point, the headstock was also modified for three tuners per side. All these holes had been plugged and the headstock was later re-drilled for a set of Fender-style tuners. Over the years, I think this Firebird has worn four sets of tuners in total.



1 With the bushing removed, you can see the maple dowel and flat-sawn mahogany plug that was used to fill the original wraptail bushing hole

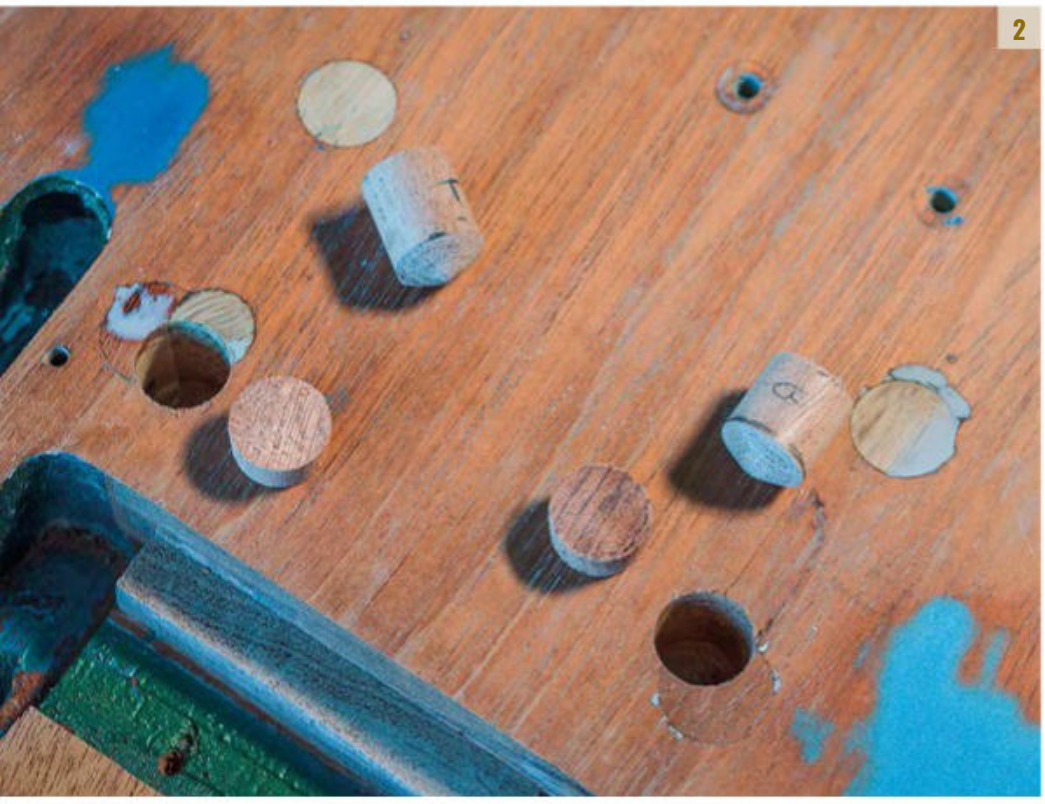
2 I shape and cut mahogany dowels to length to fill the tune-o-matic bushing holes, and they'll be capped with flat-sawn mahogany plugs

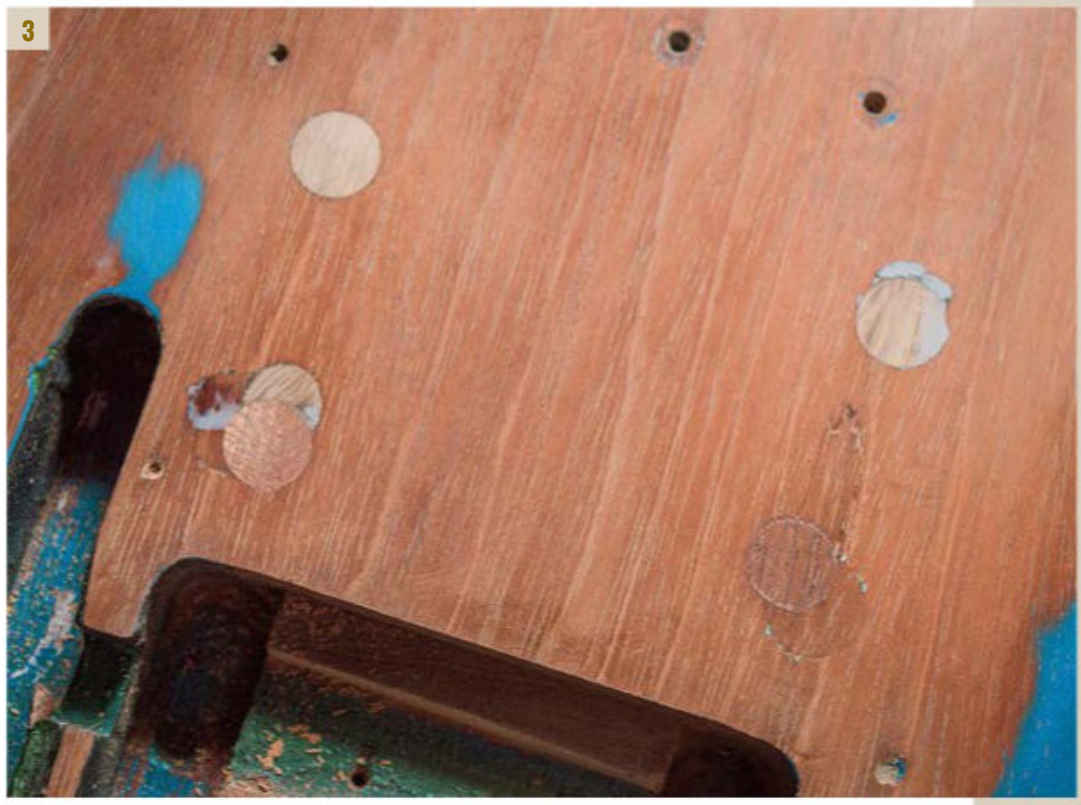
3 All the holes have been plugged and we can count seven in total

4 With the Vibrola anchoring the strings, the new wraptail is shimmed on veneer strips and carefully moved into position

5 With the new bridge installed, the Firebird is strung up for testing – it sounds so much better

6 All the plugs in the front of the headstock have been glued in and levelled





The guitar's owner understandably wanted to revert to its original look but the six-on-a-plate machinehead set he provided didn't line up with the existing holes, which means I have more plugging to do, as well as having to drill six new holes. Unfortunately, a lot of the wood on the rear was blown out by the drill bit when the last holes were made, which complicates things.

I begin by filling the neat 9mm tuner bushing holes at the front with flat-sawn 9.5mm (3/8") mahogany plugs and levelling them off. The blown-out areas on the back require 12mm plugs to disguise the damaged areas and the damage dictates the position of the plug holes. To guide the bit, I drill a 12mm hole in a piece of Perspex so I can position each plug individually.

At this point, the front plugs have only filled about 3mm at the front of the tuner bushing holes, so I glue 9mm-wide mahogany dowels in, leaving them a couple of millimetres shy of the surface. Next, I glue in the rear plugs and, once they are levelled off, I start thinking about installing the vintage-correct tuners.

Despite the numerous plugs and patches, I can still tell where the original tuners were fitted. Having identified the bushing hole positions, I realise that the existing screw holes don't line up, so seven more plugs are needed. This time I place 6mm mahogany dowelling into a pencil sharpener, create a sharp tip and cut about 5mm off the end. I tap this into a screw hole, let the glue dry and then level it off.

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18+

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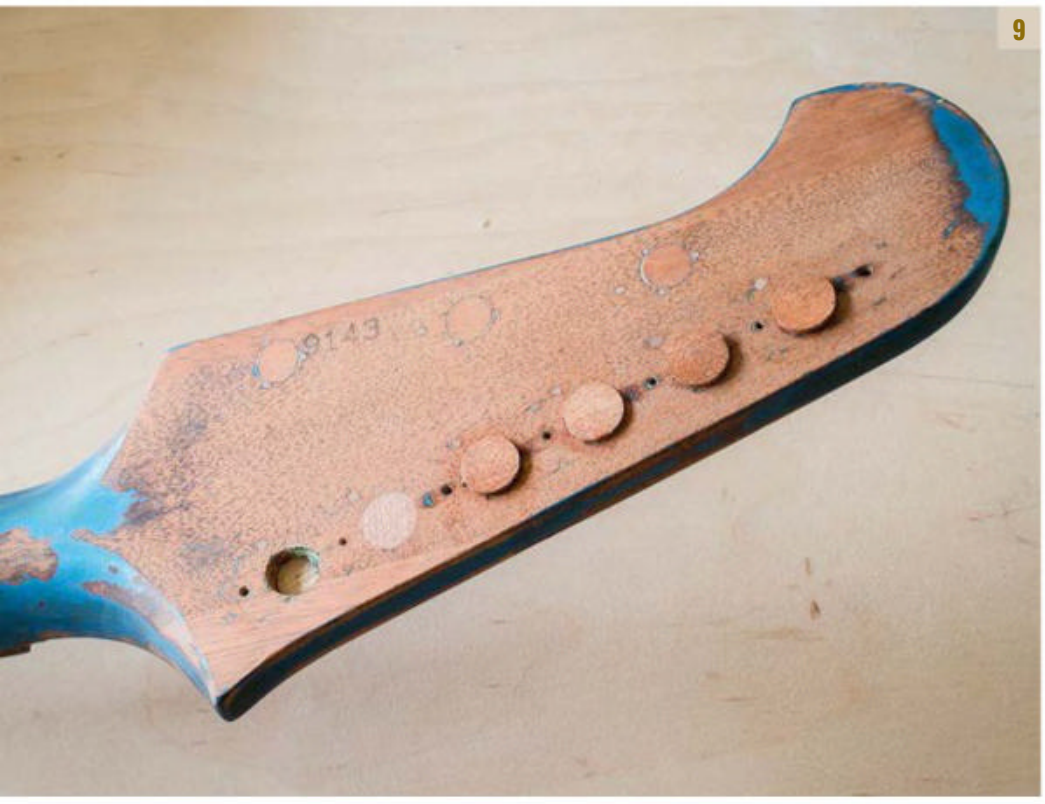
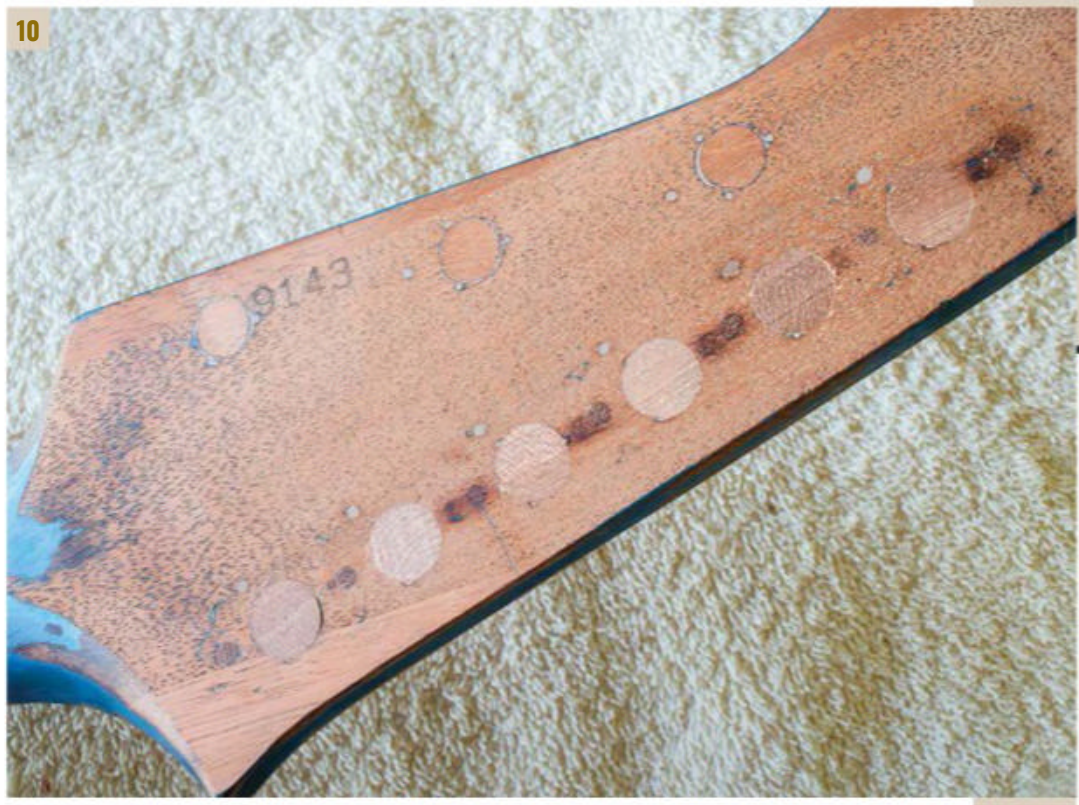
7 This tuner hole has been plugged on three occasions – let's hope this is the last time

8 The rear holes are damaged, so I drill a 12mm hole into a sheet of clear acrylic to position the drill bit for the rear plugs



9 Five of the rear plugs have been installed and one has been levelled



10 The headstock repairs are complete and it's almost ready for a vintage-correct set of tuners

11 To prevent the repairs showing through the finish, I've veneered the headstock face with mahogany

I repeat the process for each tuner-screw hole – along with the truss-rod cover screw holes. I estimate that the headstock has been home to 40 plugs and dowels in its life – but I'm still not done here. I can accept the plugs showing through the finish at the back, and most will be concealed under the tuners, but I want the front to look pristine.

The only guarantee of that, however, is to apply veneer to the headstock face – I figure that it's been sanded so many times that a 0.4mm veneer won't do it any harm.

After sanding the face as level as possible with flat sanding block, I cut some slightly oversized mahogany veneer, glue it with Cascamite and keep it pressed against the headstock using masking tape around the edges, and a flat caul with several clamps.

BACK IN BLUE

All the repairs have taken a sunburst finish off the menu, so the owner decides to stick with Pelham Blue. The existing finish is pretty rough but rather than strip the whole body back to bare wood, I sand through the tinted clear layers, grain-fill where necessary and respray with clear sanding sealer, followed by Pelham Blue and several coats of clear gloss.

The guitar was set aside for a month before I cut and polished to the high gloss you can see in the photographs. Next time, I'll be relic'ing the parts and the finish, and reassembling the guitar. **G**

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AMPLIFIER FAQ

Our resident amplifier guru Chris Fantana explains how a simple circuit mod can give you much greater control over your reverb tone

Have a burning question about your amp or, worse still, a burning amp? Email us at editors@guitar.com

Hi, Chris. How can I add a dwell control to my Fender-style reverb circuit?
Andrew, Colchester

Hi, Andrew. It's no secret that Fender's classic reverb circuit sounds sensational up to three or four on the dial. But unless you play surf music [or are the reverb-addicted editor of this magazine], the effect can become too intense for the average player at settings higher than that. It's just one of those things that players have put up with for years.

Thankfully, there are myriad ways to improve this, from swapping in different valve types to both the drive and recovery stages to changing component values to alter the circuit.

The easiest and most versatile method is to add a simple dwell control. This sits before the reverb's driver stage and controls the signal level going into the circuit. You could think of it as a preamp control, allowing the user to drive the reverb circuit as much or as little as they like.

The result is not a simple volume control though. By driving the reverb less, the dwell control affects the decay time of the reverb, allowing you to shorten it. This, balanced with the normal reverb control that sits at the output of the circuit, allows a far greater range of reverb sounds to be accessed with very little effort.

At fully clockwise, the reverb circuit is stock Fender. But as you turn the control counterclockwise, the decay time is shortened. There is a tonal benefit too – when the dwell control is lowered, more lower frequencies are allowed into the reverb circuit.

DWELLING ON IT

Figure 1 (above, right) shows the stock input circuit. The guitar signal is filtered by the RC network of both the 500pf capacitor and the 1M grid-leak

FIGURE 1

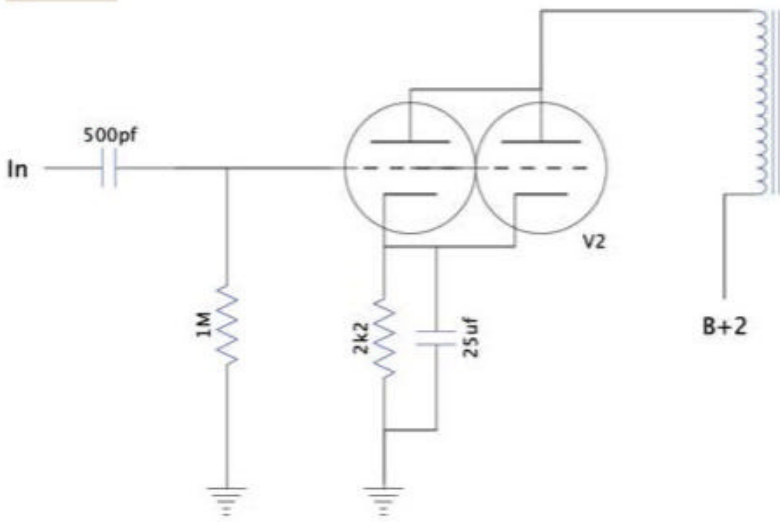


FIGURE 2

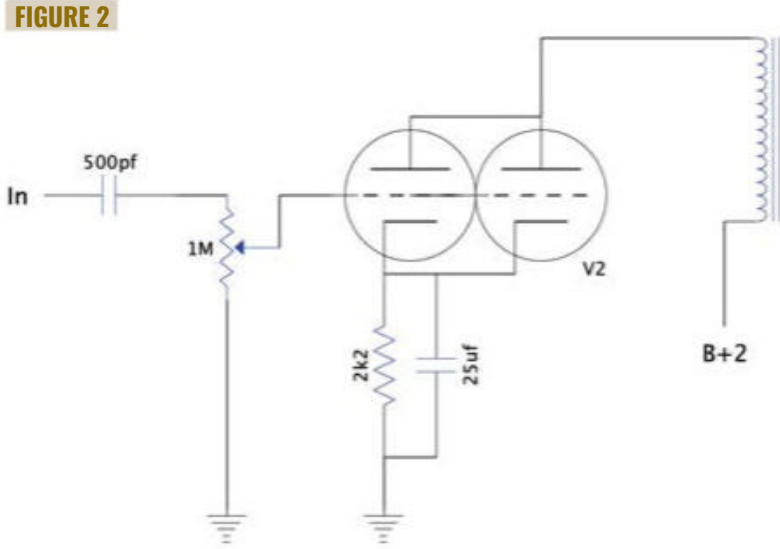
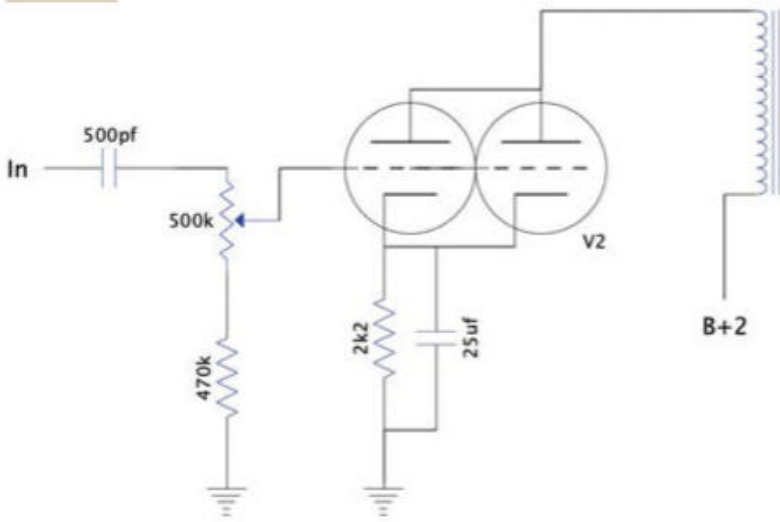
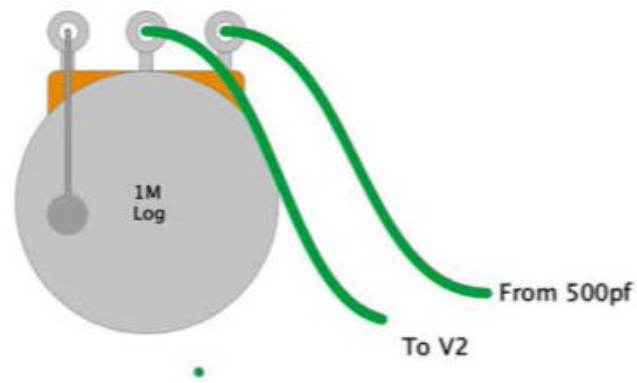
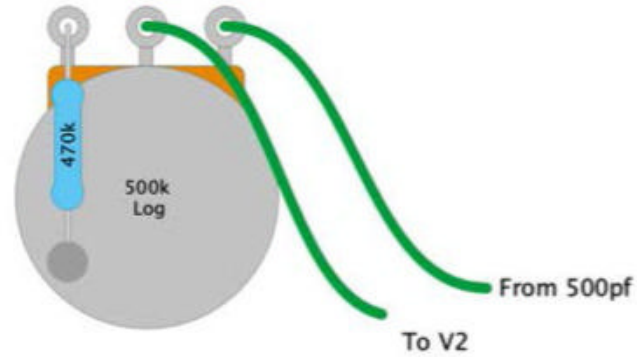


FIGURE 3







resistor before entering the control grids of the 12AT7 valve. We need to replace this 1M resistor with a variable type, also known as a potentiometer. A standard off-the-shelf 1M logarithmic pot will suffice, with lug three grounded (the back of the pot works great) and lugs two and one working as the output and input respectively.

Figure 2 shows the new circuit, with the potentiometer wired in as stated. With this, you can now send all, some or none of the guitar signal through the reverb circuit.

But that's a problem, isn't it? If you turn the dwell off completely, you'll have no reverb at all. Figure 3 shows an improved version, where the 1M resistance is split between a 500k pot and a 470k 1/2w resistor – the closest E12 value to 500k. Now, the dwell control still reduces the decay time of the reverberations but not all the way to zero and turning the effect off altogether.

SPRINGING INTO ACTION

With the dwell control wired up, you can now turn the level control up much higher than you would normally and then use the dwell to control how long the effect lasts. You now have gorgeous, spacey echoes perfect for atmospheric playing available on tap.

If you're feeling brave, try experimenting with different values for the 500pf input capacitor. You can choose to fatten up the tone with a larger value or reduce it for an airy 'verb that dances around behind your tone without getting in the way.

As always, if you're poking around inside a valve amplifier, please be careful. Follow simple safety steps such as unplugging it from the wall, measuring and discharging the high-voltage capacitors and taking your time. If you're unsure how to do this, your local tech will be able to help. **G**

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1 Stock Fender-style reverb amp circuit

2 Modified reverb circuit, with the 1M resistor replaced by a potentiometer

3 Improved reverb circuit with increased flexibility

1

2

1 My freshly built Coke Bottle Sparkle Jaguar: body from Guitar Mill, my spare '63 B neck, Spitfire 'guard, EP Custom Jaguar pickups, Mastery hardware

2 An older build: MJT body, Warmoth neck, a trio of D'Urbano Firebird pickups, Mastery hardware

3

3 A recent MJT build: Mastery bridge, Antiquity pickups, Descendant Vibrato.

4

4 Building a parts guitar? There are a few things worth considering. For one, the shape of the rout, which didn't play nicely with the Descendant we installed

5

5 Using a Dremel to quickly sand away excess finish in the vibrato cavity of my sparkle Jaguar

6 Gently removing material from the neck pocket of a Jaguar body

7 The MJT body with the proper 'guard (US shape)

8 The MJT body with the wrong 'guard (Japanese shape)

TECH TALK

HOW TO BUILD BETTER PARTS GUITARS

WORDS & PHOTOGRAPHY MICHAEL JAMES ADAMS

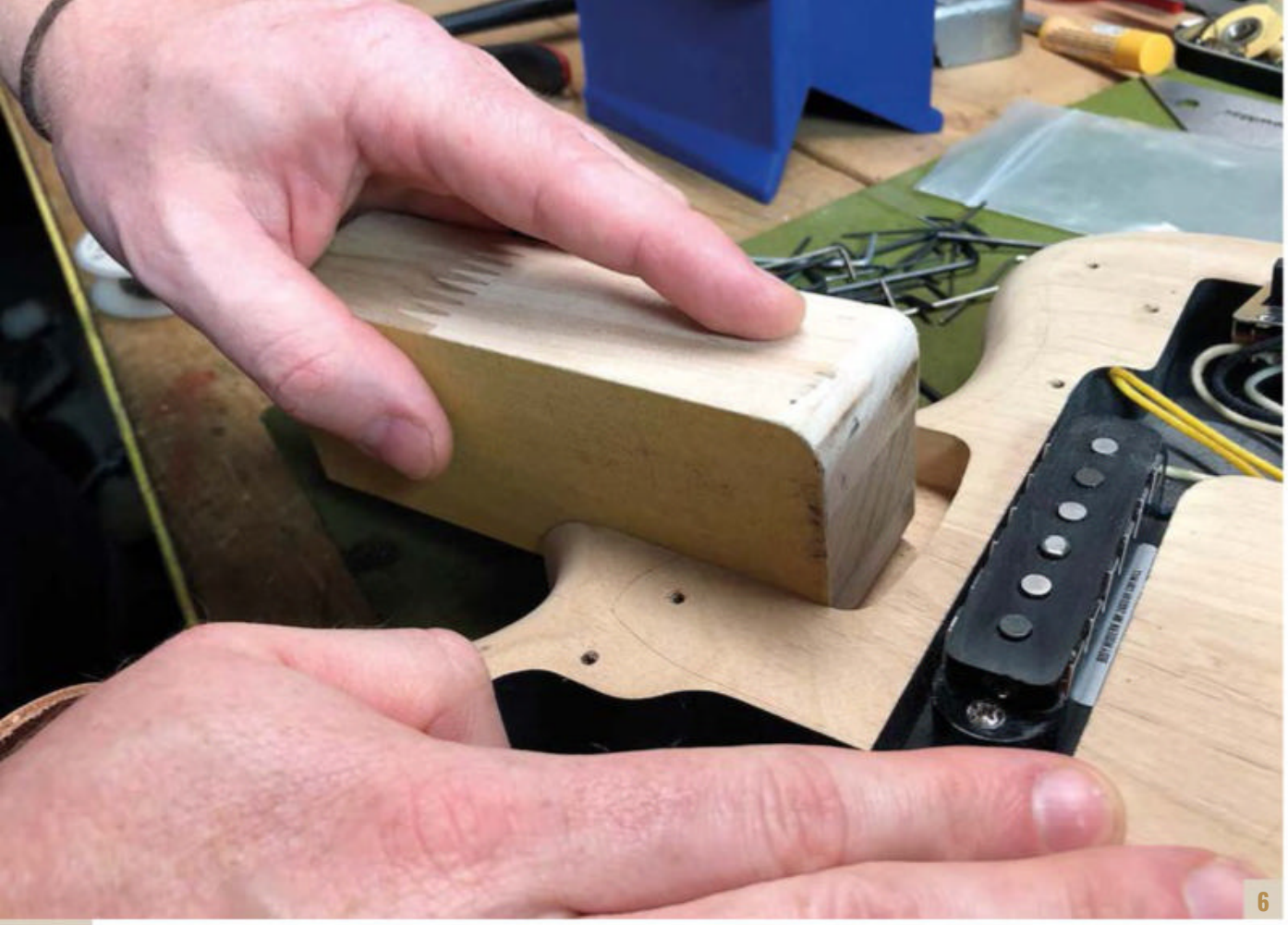
Routing template variations and neck fit can be the Achilles heel of Jaguar or Jazzmaster-inspired builds. But fear not, help is at hand

Building a guitar from parts is a fantastic way to learn how to maintain and repair stringed instruments. But depending on the style of instrument you're making, you're likely to encounter a host of common issues that we techs deal with on a daily basis.

Expect to touch on things such as bridge placement for proper intonation, how to align the string path, soldering in pickups and, if you've chosen non-standard hardware, maybe even routing. Even brand-new necks may require extra fretwork so they'll play cleanly all the way up the neck. After that's done, you'll need to finish the nut slots on that pre-cut nut you bought that was 100 per cent supposed to fit… but absolutely doesn't.

While creating a partscaster or 'master-style guitar of your own is as exciting as it is educational, it can also be incredibly frustrating. In the same way that you'll learn the techniques of guitar repair, you'll also come to understand the deflating feeling of running into a brick wall of a problem, the kind of unanticipated issue that stops you dead in your tracks.

In these moments, it pays to take a walk away from the bench and have a good, long think. In this month's column, I'm going to run you through a few of the issues I've run into on recent parts builds.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CAVITY ROUTS

It's difficult from a visual, online-only examination to determine exactly what body template is being used by various parts manufacturers and, on guitars such as Stratocasters and Telecasters, the differences between modern US, vintage and import shapes are negligible.

Perhaps you'll notice that the bridge needs to be moved backwards slightly or that the tip of the scratchplate on the treble side cutaway doesn't exactly fit. But when it comes to Jazzmaster and Jaguar-style guitars – which I basically work on almost exclusively these days – the template that you use can have an enormous impact on how difficult the job will be as the build progresses.

The main issue that I've had to deal with is the shape and size of the vibrato cavity. The internals of most non-US-made vibratos are smaller than their American reissue counterparts and so, on most Japanese guitars, the shape of the body cavity meant to accept them isn't as big. And those bodies happen to be a very common pattern for parts makers.

When you go to install an AVRI or vintage Fender unit, then, it either won't fit or it'll bolt on just fine but when you go to string it up you'll find that the vibrato gets stuck as it rubs up against the walls of the rout – and that is no good at all.

When this happens, as with each of the partsmasters I've built recently, it pays to have a Dremel on hand. Using a simple sanding attachment, you can quickly adjust the size and shape of the rout, first removing as much finish as necessary and then sanding off a millimetre or two around the perimeter of the cavity. The good thing about this is, it doesn't matter if it doesn't look especially beautiful when you're finished, because once the vibrato is installed you'll never even see it.

Mastery and Descendant vibrato systems are designed for a universal fit but even when using a Descendant on my Lilac-finished body I still had to remove material for it to work smoothly throughout its range. The rout on my sparkle Jaguar body was the right size and shape but sparkle build-up around the top was problematic, so the same procedure was used.

NECK FIT

Another potential problem when ordering parts from multiple vendors is one of neck fitment. Sometimes the neck pocket will be slightly undersized or oversized for your intended neck. Happily, the fix is usually a simple matter of sanding away just a sliver of material. Actually, when we're dealing in extremely small differences, sanding off the leftover finish in the neck pocket almost always does the trick.

Even so, it often pays to order from he same manufacturer or, at the very least, get accurate measurements in an attempt to avoid this issue. Otherwise, some gentle sandpapering should help.

TEMPLATE TROUBLE

Another issue to watch out for is when you mix those body templates mentioned earlier. Not only do the routs differ but so do the overall shapes of US and non-US bodies. With Jazzmasters and Jaguars, the difference may not be discernible until you install the pickguard.

Take a look at the example in image 7. First, we have the provided pickguard on the Lilac body, both in the basic American Reissue shape. Notice how the treble side of the guard follows the shape of the body, how the lines flow together from neck to toggle to output jack.

In image 8, I've placed on the guitar an Allparts 'guard stated to be for a '62 Reissue yet with all the tell-tale signs of the MIJ/CIJ shape. Follow the same path as before, neck to toggle. Notice how the fit veers off, and that towards the output jack the bulbous lead circuit control area takes up more space, interrupting the lines of the body.

9 Another example of a poor fit: MJT body, Japanese 'guard. We ended up acquiring a new US-spec 'guard instead

10 A Thurston Moore 'guard on the same body to illustrate a far better fit

11 A Decoboom 'guard on the same body, also to illustrate a better fit

12 Lilac on the bench, largely completed and ready for strings

13 My test fit of the Sparkle Jaguar revealed a fit problem with the way the lower control plate sits on the body

14 Using a belt sander, I removed material from one side, then re-shaped to fit the guard

15 A cleaner and more satisfying fit – even if it isn't 'vintage-correct'

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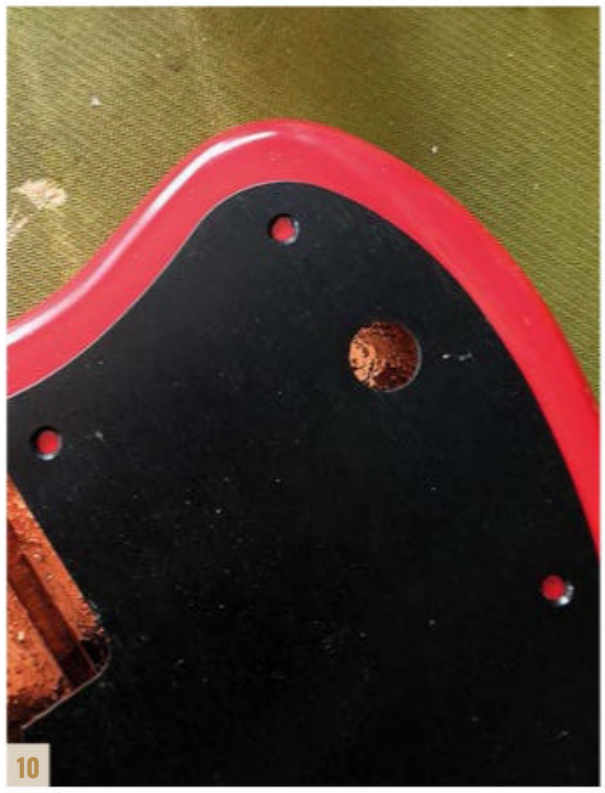
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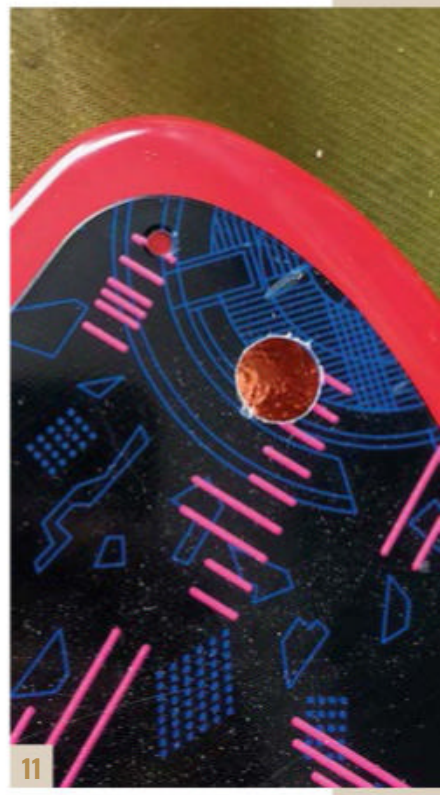
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I call attention to this because it's one of the easiest ways to spot a parts build from across the sales floor. Even some well-known builders seem to forget the importance of this aesthetic touch, and that really puts me off when I'm shopping for a new guitar.

This rule also applies to Jaguars. But there's another catch to consider with those: the chrome control plates almost never line up without some extra work. The Jazzmaster's shorter, younger sibling has three extra control plates that you'll have to grapple with once you've lined up the main plastic pickguard using the neck and bridge inserts. Let's look at this cool Coke Bottle Sparkle Jaguar body that I finished recently.

Upon my initial test fit, I found that the lead volume and tone plate looked totally wrong, with the jack area jutting out into the negative space of the sparkle finish. Now, to be fair, even vintage Fender production varied quite a bit and, if you ask me, some examples of totally original custom-colour instruments feature rather sloppy installation.

14

But 'vintage-correct sloppiness' was not going to cut it for me. If I'd left it like that, it'd be all I'd ever see. What's a guy to do? Well, this picky individual used some careful alignment tricks to get that plate in line.

First, I slid the control plate partially under the pickguard and moved it around until I was reasonably happy with the fit. Next, I marked where the 'guard overlapped on the metal plate with masking tape for reference, then fired up my belt sander, which I used to gently remove material from that side of the plate.

15

I went back and forth a few times, working slowly to ensure that I was on the right track. Soon, with a little effort, I had a control plate that lined up with the lines of the body in a way that was extremely satisfying to me. From there, I finished the build and fell in love with my sparkly new friend. I hope you find similar success with your builds. G

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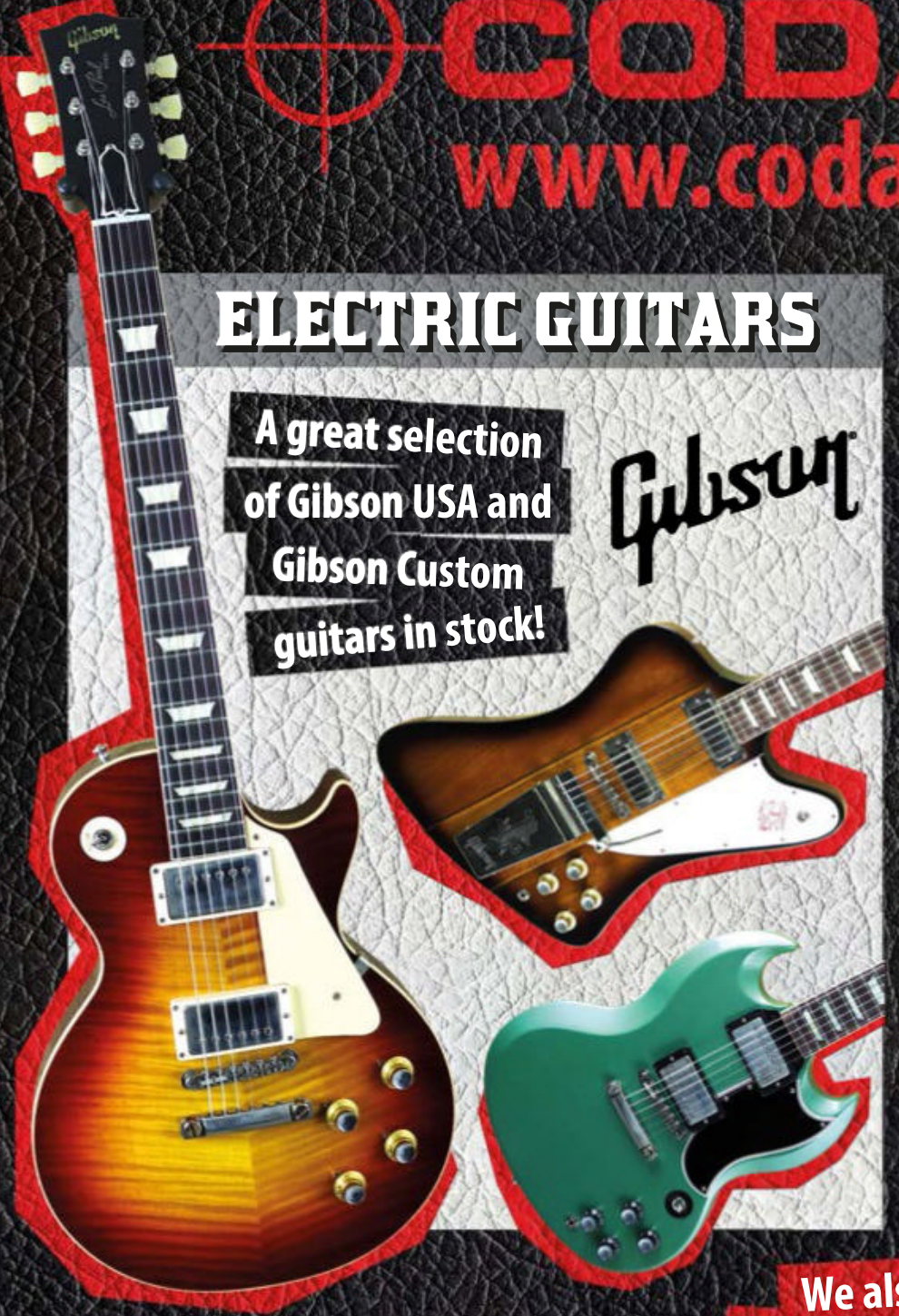

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FIVE MINUTES TO...

MARK KNOPFLER

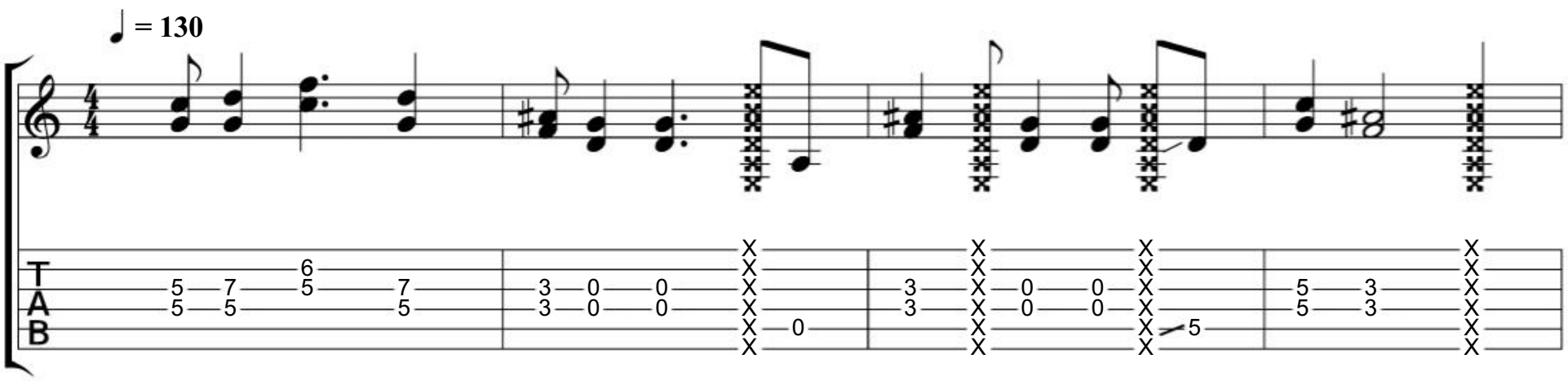
WORDS LEIGH FUGE

The sublime feel of the Dire Straits legend's electric guitar playing has captivated millions. Here's how to nail the basics

Mark Knopfler is one of the most influential and important British guitarists of all time, and he's also a player who stands apart from his rock and blues peers. Armed with a fiendish clawhammer fingerstyle technique, there's a lot more to the Glasgow-born guitarist's style than sumptuous clean Strat tones in positions two and four. Knopfler's technique provides us with so much to unpack, but here you'll find some basic shortcuts to help set you up and get you in the mindset of the man himself.

SHOW-STOPPING RIFFS

Dire Straits songs are often based around snappy finger-picked doublestop riffs like this. Here, the riff sits in the key of G minor. While you're not playing any full chords throughout this phrase, you're implying the C, B♭ and Gm chords. There are some percussive hand slaps to consider too. To play these, simply hit the strings with your hand near the bridge.



RAKE'S PROGRESS

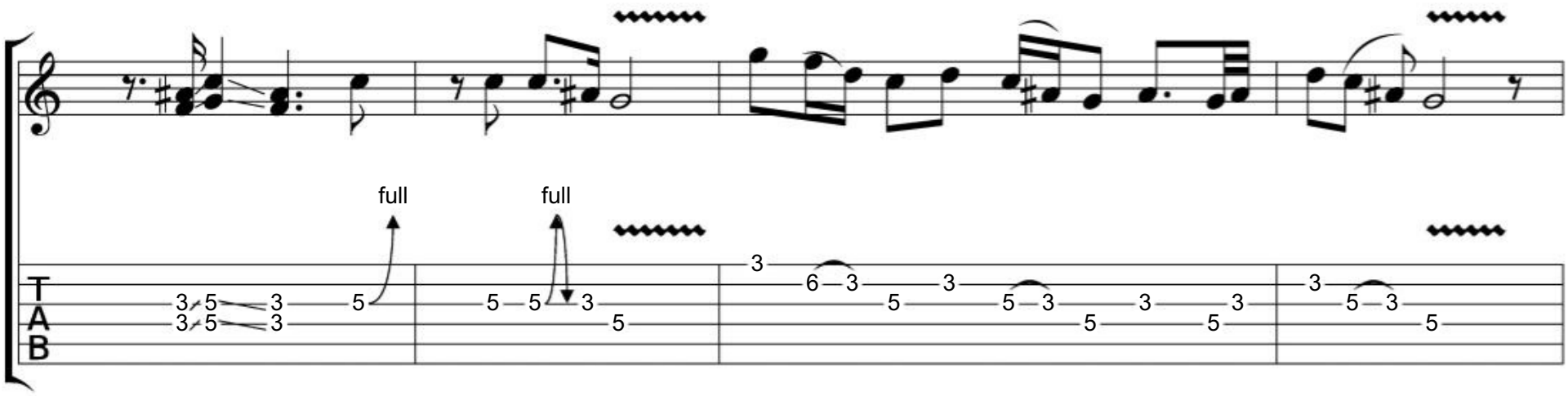
Short raked chords deployed in the middle of lead lines are a significant signature in Knopfler's playing. Executing these string rakes with your fingers can be tricky at first. Try to use your thumb for the first two notes of the triad and your index or middle finger on the final note to give it a pop.

COUNTRY-STYLE PENTATONICS

Knopfler is a country guitar devotee and this minor pentatonic style lick has a country flavour. As you're playing fingerstyle, you can get under those strings a little to make them pop. The second bar also contains another trademark Knopfler string rake.

ROCK 'N' ROLLING PENTATONICS

When you think of Dire Straits, you might not think of blisteringly fast lead lines. But Knopfler is no stranger to pulling out the odd burst of speed. This lick starts slowly but builds into a descending rolling pentatonic pattern that switches between 8th and 16th-note groupings.



Leigh Fuge is a guitar teacher and professional musician from Swansea in the UK. He has taught hundreds of students face-to-face and via the MGR Music platform. He has over 10 years' experience working in the industry as a touring musician, session guitarist and teacher. To find guitar tutors in your area, visit mgrmusic.com

CHORD CLINIC

G MAJOR

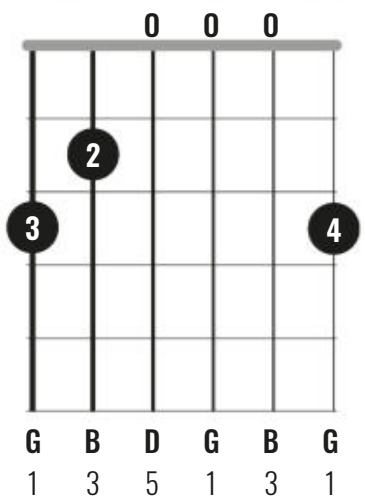
WORDS ROD FOGG

This month we're taking a look at some interesting shapes and variations on the trusty G major chord

In its basic form, G major is not the easiest chord to hold down, as it involves a stretch across the fingerboard that can be a challenge for beginners. It's worth persevering with, however, as G major has great potential as a key; C major and D major (chords IV and V in the key) are available as open-string chords, as are chords II and VI, A minor and E minor. This means all the essential chords in the key of G are easy to play without having to barre. As a result, G is a very popular key with singer-songwriters. Equipped with a capo to transpose to a key that suits a singer's voice, huge numbers of songs new and old will fall under your fingers.

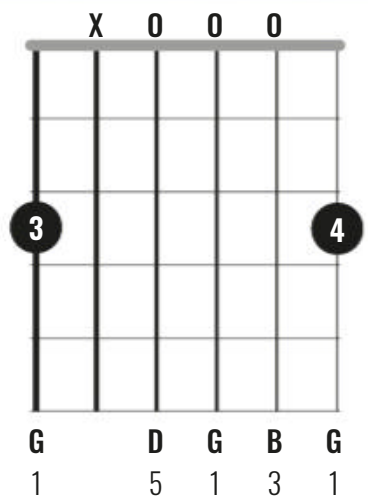
The notes of G major are G, B and D. These are the root, major third and perfect fifth, steps one, three and five of a G major scale. The way that G major fits on the guitar makes it easy to flavour the basic chord with interesting notes such as sixths, sevenths and ninths too. Enjoy exploring these chords – we'll see you next month.

G



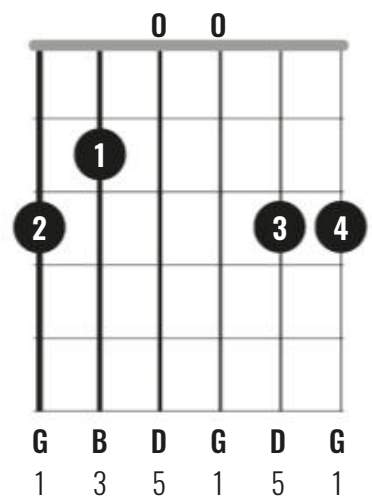
The basic cowboy chord G major requires careful fingering to avoid muting the strings with the underside of your fingers, so be sure to check that you are indeed hearing all six strings. Using fingers two, three and four rather than one, two and three is slightly more difficult but it makes it much easier to change to C major, which in this key is likely to happen often.

G



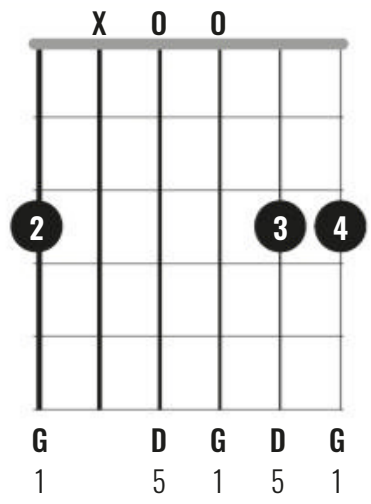
Some guitarists find the low B troubling; in classical teaching, doubling the major third in a chord is considered poor practice, even though examples of it abound. Leaving out the low B cleans out the low end and makes the chord easier to play, provided you can mute the A string with the underside of your third finger. In general, we like this voicing more.

G



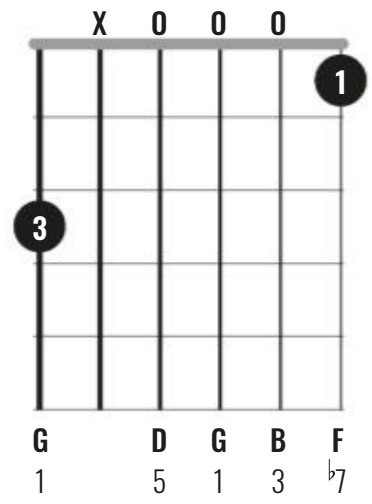
Another way of avoiding the doubled third is to double the fifth instead. The fifth has a hollower quality and doesn't suffer from the turgidness of a major third, and there's energy and power in this voicing, which makes it the go-to version of G for many players. It sounds great with a capo on the second fret or higher and is one of the chords in Oasis's iconic *Wonderwall*.

G5



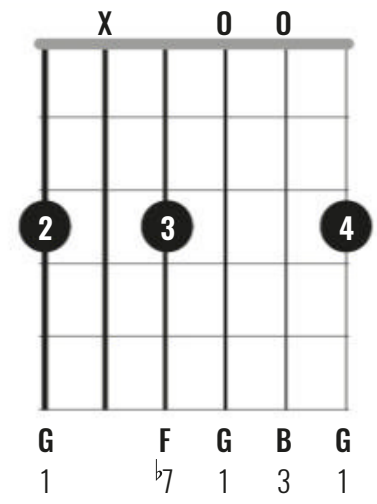
Though not technically G major, we couldn't resist including this G5 chord, which does away with the major third, instead containing just roots and fifths. 5-chords have an open ringing quality that means they cope better with distortion than their major chord equivalents. Feel a Skynyrd riff coming on?

G7



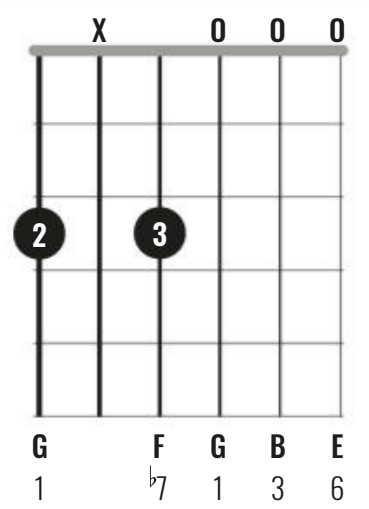
Add a minor seventh to a major chord for a seventh chord. Here we've added F using example two as a starting point, but it also works with example one. G7 is chord V in C, so play a C major after G7 and you'll hear V resolving to I. The tension between the B and F in the G7 chord is resolved when they arrive on C and E.

G



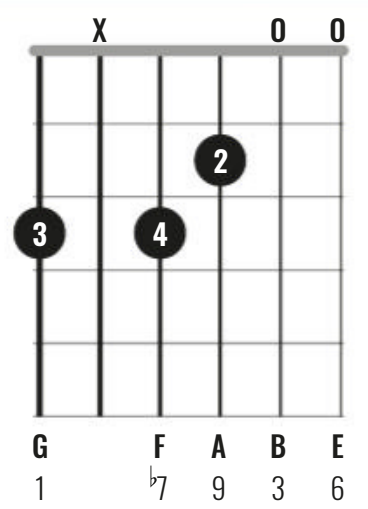
We like the idea of moving the interesting note in a chord to the lower octave. Here we've moved the F to the D string. Try switching to a C major chord again but leaving your fourth finger on the high G on the top string. Try picking an alternating bass with your thumb and arpeggios with your fingers.

G13



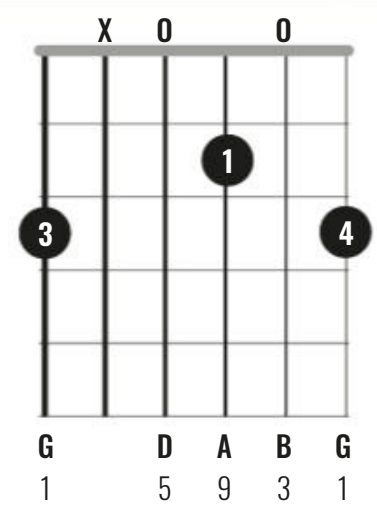
Technically, a 13th chord should include the ninth but guitarists often dodge such details in favour of a good voicing. Some theorists would describe this chord as G7/6, the sixth coming from the open E. Try following this one with C major seven for a dreamy V-I progression with the same top notes.

G13



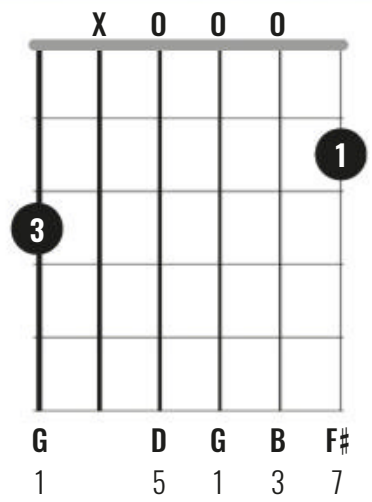
Here you get the full-fat 13th chord, with the ninth added on the G string. This also sounds good followed by Cmaj7 but see if you can keep the A on the G string sounding in both chords, so that the C major chord becomes Cmaj13. This C chord would be a 13th that omits the ninth. Though these are jazzy chords, there's a breeziness to these open-string voicings that's reminiscent of Neil Young or Paul Simon's more romantic moments.

Gadd9



We've kept the A on the G string here but added it to the basic G chord. This makes Gadd9, which is useful if you're playing a G chord and want to add interest without disturbing the essential harmony. You can add and release the A to create movement, and try letting the top string ring open to alternate between G6 and G6/9. Adjust the fingering and you could use this note to add movement to many of the above chords, such as example five, the G7.

Gmaj7



F♯ is the major seventh over G, so you won't be surprised that adding it to G major makes a G major seventh chord. This is one of the chords in the intro to Billie Eilish's *idontwannabeyouanymore*, its wistful and dreamy quality a property of major sevenths generally. Try playing G, Gmaj7, G7 before going on to C and C minor to hear how these chords can work together.

Rod Fogg is a London-based guitarist, teacher and writer. He is the author of *The Ultimate Guitar Course* (Race Point 2014), *The Electric Guitar Handbook* (Backbeat, 2009) and contributed to bestseller *The Totally Interactive Guitar Bible* (Jawbone Publishing, 2006). Find out more at rodfogg.com

TALKBOX

JOSHUA BASSETT

INTERVIEW KELLY LAMANO

The star of *High School Musical: The Musical: The Series* on the importance of breathing and the influence of James Taylor

The moment it all started...

"When I was 14, I got grounded for a month. I got in really big trouble with my parents during the summer, and I was absolutely miserable, losing my mind because I had nothing to do. I convinced my mom to let me get a super cheap guitar, and she said, 'You have to pay for it'. So, I got a hundred-dollar guitar. I was grounded for a month, and I spent that entire month teaching myself guitar, and that was how I learned to play."

I couldn't live without my...

"I have a ukulele in the front of my case, a little kangaroo ukulele. I love bringing it around everywhere. I also love the piano and have a hard time when I don't have access to one. Since I'm on the go a lot, I don't always have a piano where I'm at and that's a pretty crucial mental health thing for me. Even on the artistry side, I find a lot of peace from playing the piano."

The one that got away...

"I had a bass that I got from a pawn shop. That was one of my first instruments just because I wanted to learn bass. I got it for a discount because I offered them a hug. I wasn't able to bring that bass with me when I moved to Salt Lake City and I honestly have no idea where it is. I think my friend in San Diego has it but I haven't been with that bass in a very long time. I miss it!"

My signature model...

"It would be a Taylor 114ce, covered up with tape, because this is the guitar that I play in *High School Musical: The Musical: The Series*. So, they let me play my own guitar. He's been through a lot, all from playing. Taylor so far has been my homie."

The first thing I played when I picked up a guitar...

"The first thing that I played was *Fire And Rain* by James Taylor. That was the first one that I picked up because it was the hardest song I could think of and I said, 'I need to learn how to play the hardest song I can think of first and then the rest will be way easier'."

The best advice I've ever been given...

"John Mayer was recently talking about how we forget to just play our instruments and that it doesn't have to be that serious. Sometimes it's good to just mess around and whatever comes out, comes out. Have fun and make what you want to make; worry about the rest of that later. It's also important to breathe your way through every moment. The best playing and the best performances I've ever done have all been because I was focusing on my breath the whole time, and I was present. I was fully there and relaxed."

My Spinal Tap moment...

"I played Charlie Bucket in a community theatre production of *Willy Wonka* at the age of nine. During one performance, while I was dancing, my shoe came off and I had to keep dancing until I was able to step directly back into it seamlessly 45 seconds later. I got a standing ovation!"

My guilty pleasure...

"It's a little niche, but I'm obsessed with J-pop. Also, there's this one song from *Peter Pan* called *Flying*. I used to listen to this song all the time. It's all instrumental from the 2003 *Peter Pan* live-action movie. That song for whatever reason is magical to me. I know every single note."

I wish I was there...

"I'd attend Live Aid, hands down, specifically to see Queen. I've watched the performance tape at least a dozen times!"

If I could just play one thing...

"Classical and jazz music are everything. I'm not yet fully capable but someday I hope to play both seamlessly!"

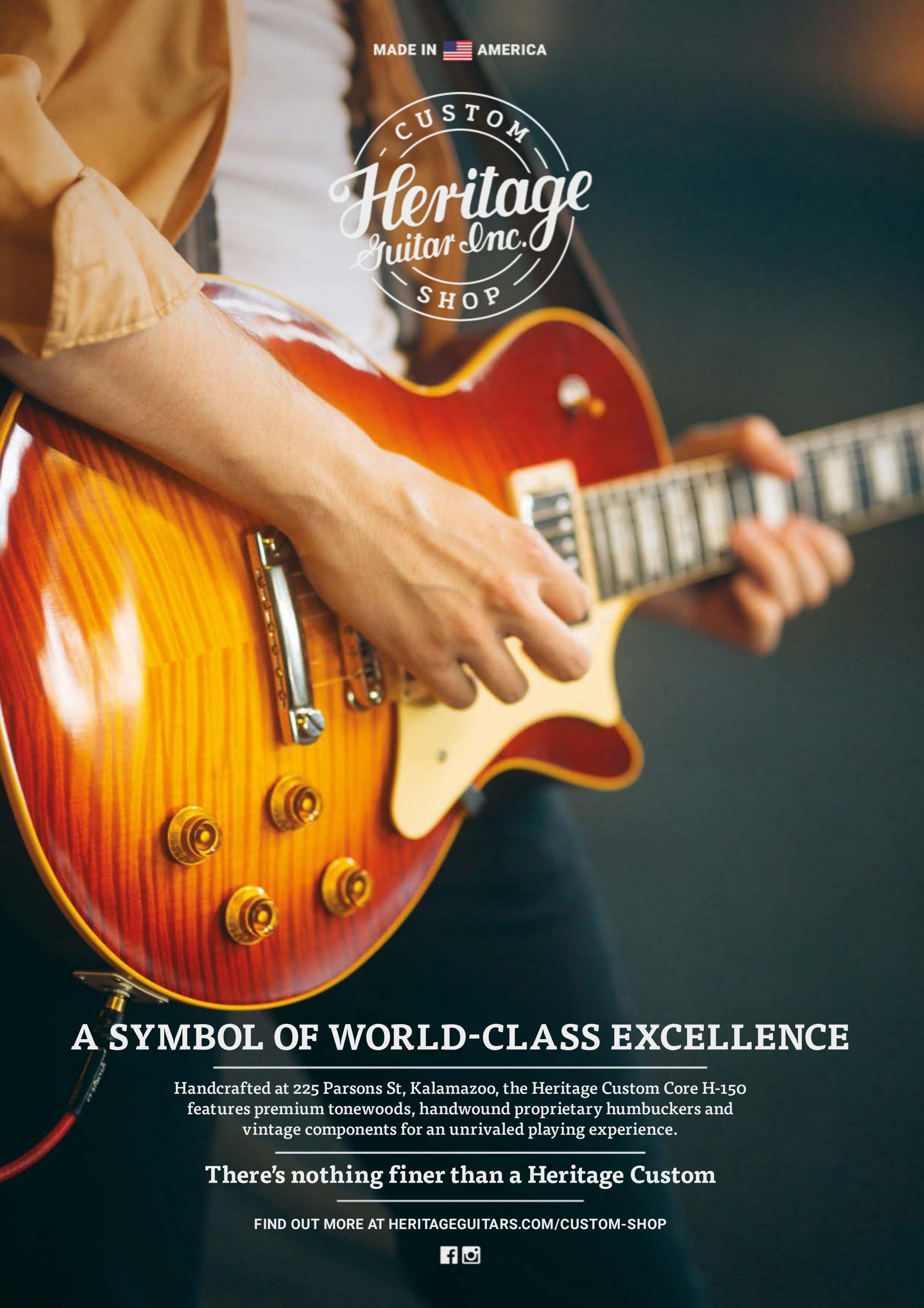
The most important thing on my rider...

"Something that I can't live without on the road is my backpack. It has my books in it, and my headphones, journal and computer. So, the backpack and everything that comes in that."

Why should you listen to my new song...

"I think most people my age are tired of social media and tired of living in fear. There have been spurts in my life where some of the things that I say throughout *Feel Something* are true. I think that's the anthem of, 'Got no plans, doing anything we can just to feel something'. We often live our lives in so much fear, not fully embracing and leaning into life, and that's what this song is about. Social media is very numbing, so it's trying to correct that and trying to just have fun."

Joshua Bassett's *Feel Something* is out now on Warner Bros



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